

Accomplishments *of the* Duke's Daughter

NOVEL

7



Written by
Reia

Illustrated by
Haduki Futaba



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Table of Contents

Color Inserts

Table of Contents Page

Title Page

Characters

Copyrights and Credits

Interlude: The Duchess Ponders Peace

Chapter 5: The Future Duchess's Shattered Dreams

Chapter 6: The Future Duchess Faces Forward

Chapter 7: The Future Duchess Finds Kindred Spirits

Chapter 8: The Future Duchess's Social Debut

Chapter 9: The Future Duchess Attends the Academy

Afterword

Newsletter





Wels

Anna

Enarene

Aurelia

Louis

Merellis



CONTENTS

INTERLUDE

The Duchess Ponders Peace

CHAPTER 5

The Future Duchess's Shattered Dreams

CHAPTER 6

The Future Duchess Faces Forward

CHAPTER 7

The Future Duchess Finds Kindred Spirits

CHAPTER 8

The Future Duchess's Social Debut

CHAPTER 9

**The Future Duchess
Attends the Academy**

Afterword

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ILLUSTRATED BY

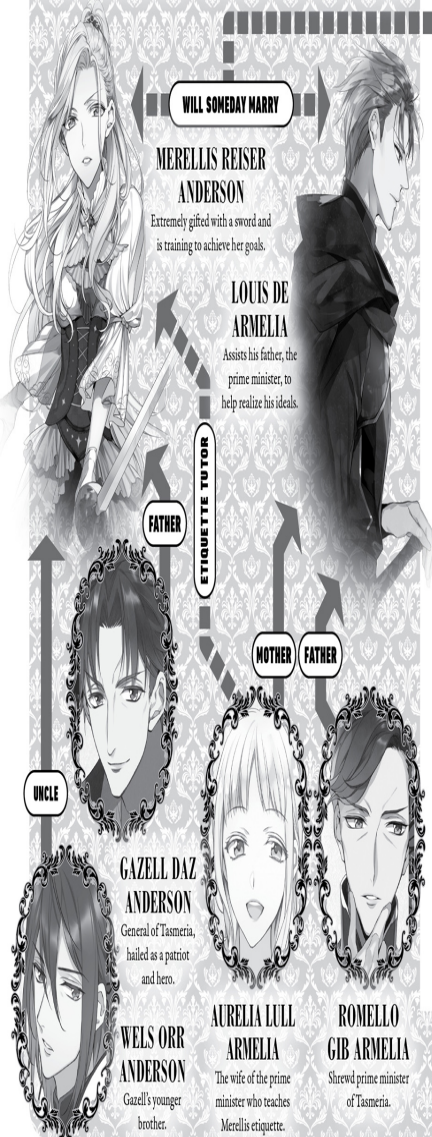
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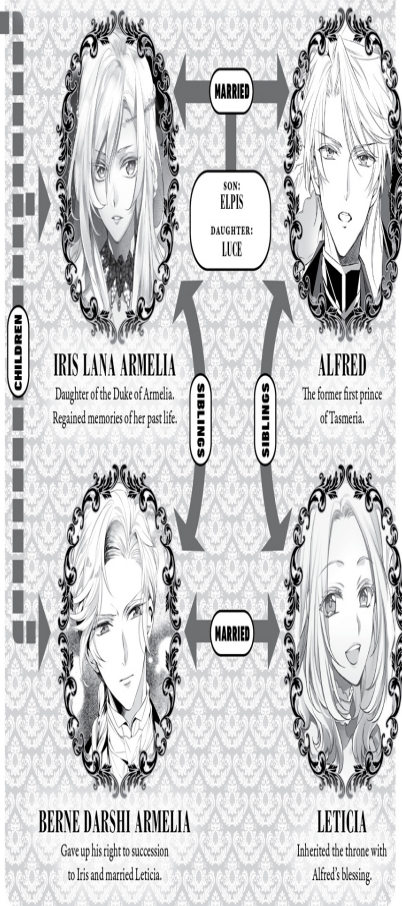
MERELLIS'S SAGA

This installment of the story follows Iris's mother, Merellis, when she was a young girl.



ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE DUKE'S DAUGHTER

This story follows Merelli's daughter, Iris, on her journey as she overcomes her reputation as a villainess and finally achieves happiness.



characters

PAX TESS ANDERSON

A gifted war tactician and Merellis's older brother.

ENARENE & ANNA

Twin sisters saved by Gazell.

EDGAR RUE TASMERIA

The first prince of Tasmertia.

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KOSHAKU FUJIN NO TASHINAMI
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Interlude: The Duchess Ponders Peace

“**N**OW, NOW, LUCE. What are you doing crying here?” Merellis found her beloved granddaughter sobbing in a corner of the training grounds.

“I’m training as hard as I can, but I’m just not getting any stronger! I lost to Dida *again* today...” It seemed like even the thought filled Luce to the brim with frustration as tears spilled out of her big eyes.

“Well, that’s to be expected, dear,” Merellis said with a chuckle. “With your current abilities, you’re not even capable of making Dida spar at his true power. You’ll just run out of bandages. First, you need to get to the point where you can spar in the same ring. Until then, you can’t use Dida’s strength as a measure of your own.” Although she smiled when she said this, those words were the final nail in the coffin. Luce burst into tears all over again.

“Oh my... Don’t cry so, Luce. Dida’s stronger and faster than you, right? But most of all, your swordsmanship needs a lot of work. You have to expect that you’d lose to him or get hurt if he’s not taking it easy on you.” Merellis hastily tried to explain it, but her words were just digging her deeper and deeper into the hole.

From her perspective, she was doing Luce a favor out of the kindness of her heart by telling her how things were. Although she was sensitive to people’s moods thanks to her experience at navigating the world of high society, her way of thinking was quite different from most people when it came to training. For that reason, she was quite baffled as to why Luce wouldn’t stop crying, and the woman heaved a sigh.

“Luce, I’m sure it doesn’t feel nice to cry so hard. Why don’t you stop?” she asked with a soft smile.

Luce shook her head. “I can’t! Because you’re mean, Grandmother!”

“But why? You’re a daughter of the House of Armelia. There’s no reason for you to train.”

This only made Luce shake her head harder. “But I want to help Mother. And I’m not smart like my brother...” The young girl hugged her knees to her chest, her cheek rubbing up against them dejectedly. “I like being active. I like training even more! I’m not good at studying, but if I become stronger, then I’ll be able to help Mother, right? So that’s why I wanna keep training.”

“Luce, did someone tell you that if you weren’t helpful to Iris—to your mother—that she wouldn’t love you?”

“No. But lots of people say that Mother is an amazing person and that I should be like her.”

Merellis let out an inward sigh. Iris’s abilities and past achievements were esteemed all throughout the kingdom, so much so that even houses that weren’t publicly fond of House Armelia were said to admit as much from the shadows.

But that wasn’t because Iris had some kind of superhuman powers. It was simply because of her character. Merellis had seen firsthand how much her daughter had painfully overcome so many obstacles to get to where she was today, so nothing irked her more than when people wrote off Iris’s accomplishments as a product of her abilities and nothing else.

She’d scratched and clawed her way, doubting herself and stopping—sometimes crying and suffering—but then Iris got back up again each time and overcame every obstacle. People who forget that never tried to get to know her in the first place. They wrote her off as someone who was just gifted with certain abilities and expected the same thing of Luce, since she was Iris’s daughter. What irresponsible adults to say such things to a child! And even if they were nothing but genuine expectations for Luce, all it did was put pressure on her anyway.

“There are people who say bad things about Father too. So if I don’t turn out to be a helpful person, then they’ll say even worse things about him. That’s why I need to work so hard.”

Merellis was speechless hearing this. Luce’s father, Dean, was kept strictly out of the public eye. This was because, in truth, he was the first prince of Armelia. In public records, he had officially died during the war against Tweil, and that meant he could never step into the spotlight. There were many nobles who opposed his marriage to Iris, especially those families who had once had aspirations of marrying into

the Armelia family.

But, of course, Merellis couldn't share this information with Luce. She was too young, first of all, but more importantly, she had no reason to shoulder the burdens of such a heavy secret.

"You really love your mother and father, don't you, Luce?"

"Yes, very much!" Luce beamed at her grandmother, her tears vanishing in an instant.

"In that case, then you shouldn't worry about what other people say. Just trust your mother and father and do as they say! You don't have to worry about being helpful to them. They love you no matter what; you don't have to do certain things in order to earn their love."

"You're amazing, Grandmother! Mother and Father said the same thing!"

"Well, I truly believe it! It saddens me that you think you have to be useful. I love you no matter what, Luce." She gently wrapped her arms around her grandchild. After a while, she slowly pulled away and looked over Luce's face. There was a happy, shy expression there, but a shadow of worry still remained in the child's eyes.

"Luce, the most important thing for you to know is that training is not easy. You can get injured, or even die, just in training! It will get even more dangerous when you start carrying a real sword and fighting in earnest. Your father and mother and I would be devastated if anything were to happen to you."

"Then I just need to get stronger so that *doesn't* happen to me."

"Ha ha ha... No matter how much you practice, and no matter how strong you become—when you're destined to lose, you will lose."

"Do you know anyone that happened to, Grandmother?"

Merellis froze for a moment. "Y-yes, of course... There have been two wars in my lifetime. And many people died in those wars. And among those who died were many strong people who worked very hard, just like you, Luce."

"Really?"

"Yes. But thankfully, the wars ended. Many people fought and died for our people's freedom, and then the long-awaited peace we're in finally came. So there's no reason for you to train and put yourself in

danger while the world is at peace.”

Luce frowned, pondering this.

“I’m sorry, was that too difficult for you to understand? Well, now that you’ve finished crying, why don’t you run along and take a nice bath?”

“Yes, Grandmother.” Luce still seemed to be deep in thought, but she obediently bowed her head to Merellis and went off to her room. Merellis watched as her granddaughter left. Letting out a sigh of herself, she went back to her own room.

I knocked on the door and went inside. Mother was sitting in her chair, staring off into space. She looked deep in thought...but also looked so beautiful that a shiver went down my spine.

“Oh, Iris!” She noticed me, and the mood in the room changed in an instant.

“I knocked, but I guess you didn’t hear me... I’m sorry. Were you thinking about something?”

“It’s all right. I’m the one who told you that you don’t need permission to come in!” Mother said with a smile. She silently gestured for me to sit, and I did so. “I just saw Luce.”

“Oh, she must’ve just finished her training. She came home with a big smile on her face and said she worked very hard today.”

For some reason Mother looked surprised.

“Mother?”

All of a sudden, she burst out laughing. “Oh, it’s nothing. I see... She said that, did she?” She didn’t share why she was laughing, so I just had to wait until she stopped. Once she did, my mother stared at me. “I was just thinking about you and Luce.”

“What about us?”

“Well, you remember how I told you that I used to be a swordswoman? Even as I was covered in blood, I prayed that no one else would ever have to be hurt. I thought that by picking up my sword,

I could make that happen.”

“Mother...”

“But then, there was a war, and even *you* had to get involved. I thought peace had finally come, but it slipped through my fingers. When will we really have true peace? How far off is it?” She looked off into the distance again. “I never wanted you to pick up a sword because of what I went through. I wanted peace for you, even if it was just a temporary one. I only understood how my father felt once I had children of my own. I said so many things back then, not knowing even a fraction of what he felt.” She had a self-deprecating smile on her face, which made my heart ache.

She picked up a sword hoping for a world where one wouldn’t be needed. What a cruel contradiction. A sword was a tool for fighting, after all. But I knew that peace wasn’t something handed out freely. You had to grab on to it and protect it with all you had or it would slip from your grasp.

Dida had forced me to face that harsh reality, and also instilled in me the need to be prepared for it. He asked me if I could give the orders to kill my enemies to protect our people—if I could accept that contradiction without turning a blind eye to it. Even though I wouldn’t physically pick up a sword myself, was I ready to give orders that would mean the deaths of others?

The weight of that responsibility had fallen heavily onto my shoulders. I’d struggled with the contradiction. Even though Mother had been in a different position because she *had* picked up a sword, I’m sure she felt something similar. “Will you tell me about it, Mother?”

My request was out of the blue, but Mother smiled at me as if she had expected it. Last time when I’d asked her to share more stories of her past, she demurred and said, “Later.” To be fair, it had been late and we needed to prepare for dinner. But ever since then, I’d been dying to know what had happened next.

“Yes, of course. That’s why you came here in the first place, isn’t it, Iris?” Mother smiled, getting ready to tell more of her tale...

Chapter 5:

The Future Duchess's Shattered Dreams

“WHY? Why should I give up my sword? Why are you telling me to do this, Father?” I asked him. But my father’s expression did not change.

“Why? Because you are the daughter of a marquis. And you are expected to have a political marriage.” His voice was perfectly even and calm.

I was silent. Of course everything he said was true, and it made perfect sense—but having it shoved in my face rendered me speechless.

“The way you’ve lived your life so far has been far from normal. Even though you are the daughter of a marquis, I allowed you to pick up the sword, but no longer. From now on, you must learn proper etiquette in preparation to be married.”

“No! I don’t want to! I...!”

“My decision is final! I won’t hear any objections!” Father yelled angrily, silencing my protests. I’d never seen him be angry outside of the training grounds, and it made my mind go completely blank. “...We meet with the Armelia family in one week.” That was all he said before he left the room.

I stood there for a while, completely stunned. Finally, my body went completely weak, and I slumped to the floor. I didn’t understand. All of a sudden, my father had asked to see me, then he said my engagement to the eldest son of House Armelia had been finalized. I laughed it off and said he must be joking, but then he told me with a serious face that the matter had been decided. On top of that, he said as “a daughter of a marquis” and “a future duchess” I had to quit my efforts with the sword.

What in the world was going on? It felt like everything inside of me was crumbling. I couldn’t try to continue down the path I’d decided on before in order to reach my goals. That path had been destroyed, along with my goal itself.

And yet I’d finally encouraged myself to keep going, not wanting

all of my efforts and hard work to have been in vain, not wanting to deny who I really was. But now, things were different. I had always been the one to decide my own path. I made my own decisions about my future, and I always had. And I thought that my father supported that. Otherwise, I never would've been able to devote myself so seriously to the way of the sword.

But just as Father said, such a way of life was impossible for the daughter of a marquis. Not only had I been robbed of my blade, which I had so much pride in, but I'd also been robbed of the right to choose my own future.

I'd held such hopes and dreams, and to have that taken away from me was beyond devastating.

"Aaaahhhhhhh!"

The hopelessness I felt was suffocating. I screamed as loud as I could. *Why, why, why?* Why had this happened? What had I done wrong? Had I been wrong for being free? Had I been wrong for dreaming?

Maybe I'd done everything wrong, even from the very beginning.

I asked all these questions, but of course there was no one to answer. I had no outlet for this anger, and it gnawed away at my heart. And so I kept screaming, trying to rid myself of the fury that burned inside of me.

Finally, my throat had grown hoarse from crying. I rose to my feet. My mind felt completely blank, like after I had run with all my might. I found myself back in my room without even realizing I went there. I walked over to the window and placed my hands on the glass.

I felt much like I did when I realized that those I had sworn vengeance against were dead. The cool feeling of the glass under my fingers calmed my heart a bit. I closed my eyes, just as I did back then. I didn't want to see anything. I didn't want to hear anything. I wanted to isolate myself from everything. Because I still wanted to dream.

Even though I hadn't decided which path I should go down, it would disappear the moment I gave up on dreaming. Louis had told me that day to fight for my dream. I clenched my hands into fists. My beloved sword hadn't been confiscated yet, so I picked it up and ran from my room.

My mind still felt like it was in a jumble, but I quietly yet swiftly snuck out of the mansion. I cut across the yard and headed toward the servants' entrance instead of the front gate. *Almost there—almost to the outside world.* As I got closer, the gate grew bigger and bigger. But then a thought crossed my mind. I hadn't planned anything. I'd acted on impulse and that's how I got here.

I was still a little girl. If I left home alone, what could I possibly do? Those doubts flitted through my head. But I quickly pushed them away to the corner of my mind. The last thing I wanted to do was give up now, so I had no choice but to keep going. First, I'd leave this mansion, and then I could figure out what to do next.

"I didn't think you'd actually try to leave." All of a sudden, a familiar figure appeared right in front of the gate, freezing me in my tracks. What was Father doing here? It was as if he knew all along this is what I would do. I was stunned and couldn't move. And that mistake cost me.

Even if I fought with all my might, I only had a one-in-three chance of beating him. But more importantly, my mind was so muddled right now that he'd be able to best me with no problem. And on top of that, he'd confiscate my sword. Once again, the hopelessness of the situation weighed on me heavily.

"Come on, Merry. Back to your room. No matter what you do, it won't change my decision." He grabbed my sword, then my hand, and he dragged me back.



Father did not return my sword after my attempt at running away. Not only that, but he confiscated the clothes I typically wore for training. I was put under surveillance twenty-four hours a day. If he just had someone from the guard watching over me, I could've knocked them out and run away, but unfortunately, he had female servants watching my every move. I wouldn't feel right about raising a hand against them, especially since they had never fought before. I wasn't so far gone that I would take on defenseless women.

I found opportunities to slip away a few times, but there were so many of them watching my every move that inevitably, someone would notice and say loudly, "Just what do you think you're doing, Lady Merry?!" Then, they'd all surround me at once, block any path of escape, and force me back to my room.

Under normal circumstances, I would've expected some strong members of the guard to watch over me, but this was the complete opposite, and it rendered me helpless. Father must've been the one behind this situation. I wasn't sure, of course, but no matter who it was, they understood my mindset very well.

And so since I was unable to do anything about it, time just kept passing.

Yet another day wasted with nothing to do, I thought as I let out a sigh and gazed out the window toward the tower. "Louis..." I murmured his name. Now that I'd had my freedom taken away from me and my future decided for me, I found myself thinking about him a lot. I still hadn't told him I loved him. In fact, I'd only recently realized my feelings for him were love. But now that I knew, there wasn't anything I could do about it.

I wished I could at least thank him for showing me such a wonderful, warm emotion. But not being able to was so painful. Now I would have to enter a political marriage because I was the daughter of a marquis. Even though I understood that in my head, I just couldn't picture it. And that was why I was still able to dream. I dreamed of being able to hold my sword again. I dreamed of telling him how I felt, and of a future where we would walk side by side.

"...I love you..." With no one else to hear them, my words fell

emptily into the air around me. I gave a sad smile at my harsh reality and sighed. I pressed my forehead against the windowpane and looked outside. When I did this, it almost made me feel like I was outside. But of course, it was only an illusion. The window was a barrier between me and the outside world, and that wouldn't change. The outside world seemed so close, but it was so far away. The same went for my freedom.

It reminded me of the distance between him and me. I gave a weak laugh. We became so close, but now we were so far away. I clenched my hands into fists. My fingernails dug into my palms until a faint line of crimson fell down from them.

Drip. Drip.

Dark red droplets ran down the glass. When I looked at my hazy reflection, the rivulets seemed to be running down my face, making me look like I was crying tears of blood.

"I don't want to give up," I said in a hoarse voice. And I meant it. I knew it wasn't befitting of the daughter of a marquis. But still.

Was it that selfish to wish for freedom?

Was it that childish to have a dream?

There was a battle in my heart between the common sense of carrying out my duty and my instincts of asserting the right to abandon that duty.

No, a battle wasn't the right way to describe it. I was leaning toward following my instincts, but my common sense was frantically trying to stop me.

I only now began to feel pain from my hands and pulled them away from the window. Tiny crescent moon-shaped marks were gouged into my palms.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. "Mistress, Lord Pax is here to see you." I heard someone call from the other side. I wiped the blood from my hands and headed toward the door—the only way out of my bedroom. Beyond the door was a parlor belonging to "Merellis."

I looked around; there were three servants here to watch over me. As usual, one stood by the only entrance, one stood by the window, and one by the door which led back to my bedroom. They blocked all my avenues for escape, just as they always did.

Nana stood by the door which led to the hallway. I glanced over

at her, and she opened it.

“It’s good to see you again, Merry,” my brother said.

“You look well. How’s school?”

“I’m having fun there. You look...a little pale.”

I looked at my lap. There was really no point in pretending in front of him.

“I...heard all about it,” he said.

“Oh, did you?” I blurted out with a laugh, trying to suppress my anger.

“There are only three days left until the meeting with your fiancé. Do you still want to run away?”

I was about to nod, but I managed to stop myself. “Why did Father suddenly decide to arrange a marriage for me?”

“I don’t know why. But I’m sure he has his reasons.”

“For the good of our house?”

“I’m not sure, but I don’t think so.”

“Then why?”

“I don’t know. This is just a guess on my part, but from everything Father has ever said or done, I can’t imagine him choosing the house over you.”

I stared at my brother’s expression, trying to gauge how sincere he was.

“After all, Father was the one who believed in your talents with a sword and was proud of it over anyone else. So that’s why I’m certain he has some good reason for doing all this.”

Those words echoed over and over again in my mind.

“No matter what his reasoning is, don’t you think it makes it pointless if he doesn’t share his reason with me? Because I’m totally against this!” And I would be until I heard *why* he was doing all this. “By the way, Brother—I’ve been so bored lately that all I’ve been able to do is read books.”

My brother looked momentarily confused by the abrupt subject change.

“And there was one book in particular that was incredibly interesting. The main character was the daughter of a town’s mayor. Ever since she was little, she would pretend to be a seamstress. She dreamed of becoming a dress designer and having her own shop. Then, she met a merchant and fell in love with him. She wanted to marry him, but her parents objected, saying she should marry someone else for the good of the town. In the end, the girl ran away with the merchant and opened up a successful dress shop in another kingdom. What do you think about that story, Brother?” I was telling the truth—I did actually read this book. Perhaps it wasn’t appropriate for a noble girl to be reading, but the servants had brought me all the most popular books from the port in an attempt to “bring out my femininity,” and that book was among them.

“It sounds like a story girls would love,” my brother said with a chuckle. “To put it simply, it’s your life, so you should choose your own path. But in order to do that, you have to have determination and sincerity.”

“Determination and sincerity...” I repeated. It reminded me of my beliefs when it came to combat. In order to kill someone, you had to be prepared to die yourself. And you had to be sincere enough to not forget those who had given the ultimate sacrifice of their lives.

I could understand both of those things, so my brother’s words fell heavily onto my heart.

“That’s right. No matter how much the main character wished otherwise, she was born as the daughter of the family who governed the town. I don’t know details about this town, but one can assume that as the daughter of the mayor, her family was fairly well off. And if that was the case, then perhaps she had a duty to devote herself to the future betterment of the town in exchange for the benefits she had enjoyed. But if she chose to instead abandon all of that, then she’d have to take responsibility for that decision. She needed to be sincere about her choices and not forget about the sacrifices it led to. Because if she chose this new path for herself without taking responsibility for her actions, then she would be nothing more than a selfish child, don’t you think?”

“Sacrifices? That’s an interesting way of putting it.”

“Is it? In order to gain something, one must sacrifice something else. And if you’re not willing to make those sacrifices, you might as

well give up. That's just the way the world works. In terms of this story, the main character had to sacrifice her relationship with her family, her obligations to repay the villagers whose taxes she'd lived off of, and perhaps even her husband's future as a merchant."

"Her husband's future? Really?"

"That's right. I'm sure her husband had to deal with hardships when they moved to another kingdom, just as she did. For example, if he was the heir to a large shop, it's possible he was already betrothed to someone as well. And if he kicked that other person to the curb in order to be with the main character, he certainly couldn't ever come back to his family's shop. Or it could even be something simpler than that. Since they moved to another kingdom, at the very least, he had to sacrifice the relationships he made with all his local customers and had to start from the ground up in their new city. I'm just going off the little bit of the story you told me, so I'm not exactly sure what happened."

At the very least, my brother had certainly given me some food for thought.

Up until that point, I assumed I just had to take responsibility for my own decisions and that would be enough. If I ran away and told Louis how I felt—even if he felt the same way—I would end up putting a great burden on him. And it would greatly affect the reputation of my family. Could I have ever forgiven myself for putting that on him when he was working so hard toward his own dreams?

The answer was no. I knew that. I'd heard him talking about his dreams. I knew just how much time he'd spent, how much responsibility he'd shouldered, how devoted he'd been to his goal.

There was no way that I wanted to be the one who stood in the way of that dream coming true. That was the *last* thing I wanted.

"Merry...?" My brother looked concerned as I sat there silently with a frown on my face.

"It's nothing. I was just thinking, that's all."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

He didn't seem convinced, but he could tell I wouldn't budge, so he didn't press me any further. "I won't blame you, no matter what path you choose," he said softly instead of questioning me more. I looked up

at him in surprise. “But please—don’t do anything you’ll regret. Don’t become someone who can’t make compromises. Because I think once you become a person like that, you end up throwing away everything you’ve ever worked for.”

“Brother...”

“When I watched you continue down the warrior’s path, you seemed to sparkle. And I think that’s because you have a very strong sense of self. I admired you very much for that.”

It was so sudden that I didn’t react right away. I just stared at him with my mouth hanging open like a fool.

“Can you blame me? After all, I’m the heir to House Anderson, a military family. Obviously I’d admire your talents.”

I had no idea that my brother thought of me that way. “Brother... Have you ever felt like succeeding Father is a great burden? Did you ever want to abandon everything and run away...and instead do something you were interested in, like military tactics, for example?”

“I’d be lying if I said no.” He let out a deprecating laugh. “But I’ve never seriously considered it. Eventually, I’ll be shouldering that great responsibility. But at the same time, I see it as a great right. I don’t ever want to lose someone precious to me in that way again, and I don’t want anyone else to have to go through that, either. And if that wish comes true, even in the smallest way, then taking on this responsibility will have been worth it.”

My brother held the same wish in his heart that I had. An indescribable sense of regret washed over me. I wondered if the shock from having the path of the sword taken away from me made me stubbornly cling to that dream to the point of not being able to see anything else. Had I forgotten that first wish I had—that *other* long-held dream?

“I think maybe you should change your perspective. For example, did you always want to join the army? Why were you honing your skills? Were you after the honor of joining the army, or was it to protect the citizens?”

That’s right, I thought in response to those words Louis had said long ago.

“Thank you, Brother.”

He reached out and caressed my head. It had been so long since

he touched me, and my heart felt warm and cozy. “I meant what I said. As long as you don’t regret whatever path you choose, I support you.” And with that, he left the room.

The next three days passed by in a whirlwind. Today, Father was taking me to House Armelia. After I spoke with my brother, I gave up on the idea of running away because I lost confidence in that decision. What if I regretted it?

Was it selfish to wish for freedom? Was it childish to dream? No. No, I didn’t think so. However, I had a wish inside of me that I wanted to come true more than I wanted freedom, and more than I wanted to dream. I sought that freedom and dreamed that dream so I could make that wish come true. So in that case, how could I make it a reality? That was what I had to figure out now.

Perhaps joining the Armelia family would be the connection I needed? I wasn’t certain of it, but I decided I was going to stop rejecting everything outright. All I knew was the sword. That was why I had no means, no other choice to realize my goal. So this was a good opportunity to focus on something else. Plus, I wanted to get to the bottom of this—and by “this,” I meant the chief nobles of Tasmeria, the family whose head had been the prime minister for generations—House Armelia.

But no matter how much I tried to prepare myself, the lingering attachments I had to Louis still smoldered in my heart. But what would I do if I saw him? What would happen if I told him about my feelings? To be perfectly frank, the worst that could happen was that it could damage our ties to the duke’s house, but I didn’t particularly care. If Duke Armelia’s son was some kind of hopeless person who had no sense of what it meant to be a noble, and if marrying him would put realizing my wish out of grasp, then I really would run away for good this time.

It’s just... Even if I did run away, I couldn’t choose to be with Louis. The last thing I wanted to do was stand in *his* way.

I closed my eyes and pictured Louis’s profile in my mind’s eye. I thought of him telling me about his dream to carry on the wishes of those who had sacrificed their lives during the war against Tweil and to

devote his life to serving the kingdom so no one would ever have anything taken from them like that again.

I wanted to run toward that same dream, together.

“Are you ready?” There was a knock at the door, and my father appeared. He was impeccably dressed in his military uniform.

“Yes...” Nana and two other maids had picked out the outfit I wore today. They put hair extensions in to lengthen my short hair and applied light makeup to my face. And, of course, the dress I wore today wasn’t an ordinary one, and I felt so awkward in it that my shoulders were stiff.

Putting that aside, when I looked in the mirror I thought, “*Who is that?*” I looked so different from how I usually looked. I felt like this was dangerously close to deception; I admired Nana’s skill with makeup but also shuddered with fear at its power.

Father walked me outside to the carriage. It was so quiet inside that I was afraid to even breathe too loudly. We hadn’t really spoken much to each other since our argument. And I hadn’t the faintest idea what to say to him now. So, instead, I escaped by turning toward the window and watching the scenery go past. It felt like time was going by at an achingly slow pace. The heavy mood in the air was just so oppressive that I let out several sighs. I kept thinking, “*Are we there yet? Are we there yet?*”

Finally, we reached the Armelias’ mansion. We walked up to the door, and a middle-aged man who appeared to be the butler greeted us.

“Are we too early?” Father asked casually, as if he’d spoken to this man several times before, which surprised me.

“Not at all. Lord Armelia has been anxiously awaiting your and your daughter’s arrival, Lord Gazell!”

“Ah, glad to hear it. Oh, Merry? This is Alf, the butler.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Merellis Reiser Anderson.”

“Why, thank you for being so polite to a mere butler! I am tasked with keeping things running here at the mansion in the capital. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Now, Lord Gazell, Lady Merellis. Please allow me to show you inside.”

Alf led the way, and we followed him. The mansion was not decorated in a showy way, but it was lavishly furnished with pieces that

had a dignified air about them. Everything in it seemed to have a history.

“Pardon me, but Lord Gazell and Lady Merellis have arrived, Your Grace.” Alf stopped in front of a door and called toward it. The door opened with a click.

I was finally about to meet the Duke of Armelia, but my legs were trembling so much I could barely take the first step. I looked down at my feet and followed behind my father. The moment he stopped, I felt my anxiety reach its peak. But I couldn’t look down at the floor forever, so I slowly lifted my gaze.

And what I saw before me made me feel like time had stopped. That’s how stunned I was. Why—why was Uncle Romello here? I wanted to scream my thoughts, but no words came out of my mouth.

“Uh-oh, I can tell by that look on your face that Gazell didn’t tell you about me, hm?”

“I didn’t have the time. As you predicted, Merry tried to run away. I haven’t seen her since we caught her and brought her back.” My father reluctantly answered Uncle Romello, who was apparently the Duke of Armelia.

I thought at first there must’ve been some mistake, or perhaps it was a case of mistaken identity. However, as soon as I heard their conversation, I knew that couldn’t be it.

It was true—Uncle Romello really was the Duke of Armelia!

“I’m sorry for the surprise. Let me introduce myself to you formally. I’m Romello Gib Armelia.”

“H-ho—why?!”

“Well, it just worked out that way. That’s just how it is. It’s not like I ever lied to you about it. Oh, by the way—I actually *did* meet Gazell at a tavern.”

“Well, who would ever think that you’re a duke by the way you act! It’s true we met at a tavern, and you may not have lied, but I feel like it was pretty wicked not to tell the whole story.”

“Oh, stop, Gazell. You’re making me blush. I’m just good at putting on a mask. And you say I don’t look like a duke? Well, there’s no reason to act differently in front of the little lady than I ever have before. Plus, I could turn those words right back on you! You certainly

don't seem like a marquis!"

"...Shut up."

The two of them were bantering back and forth like they usually did. And as far as I could tell, Father was being incredibly rude to Uncle, but who would've believed it?

How could this man be the Duke of Armelia, the most important aristocratic family in the kingdom?!

"Oh! It's almost time for my son to arrive."

I was so bewildered that I'd forgotten the chief reason we were here today, but I snapped back to reality once Uncle spoke of it. I wondered what Uncle's son was like. I was incredibly curious, but at the same time felt depressed by the reason behind our meeting. My heart pounded even louder than when I'd first entered the room. Another loud noise overlapped with the sound of my quickening pulse—someone rapping on the door.

Uncle nodded, and one of the servants waiting inside the room quietly opened the door. I hastily dropped my head and looked at the floor.

"Excuse me."

The moment I heard that familiar voice coming from the doorway, my head whipped back up.

"What?!" I blurted out, mouth hanging agape when I saw him. I was even more stunned than when I found out Uncle Romello's true identity—so shocked I couldn't even react.

He was just as surprised as I was, and stared at me, dumbfounded. "Merry?!"

It *was* him. I *knew* him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked with surprise, cementing my certainty.

My body moved before I knew what I was doing. "That's what I want to know! What are you doing here, Louis?!" I went right up to him and looked him straight in his eyes.

"What do you mean, what am I doing here? This... This is my house!" He answered with a mixture of bewilderment and awkwardness.

“What? So then—you’re—but...!”

All of a sudden, Uncle Romello burst out laughing. “*Ha ha ha!* So it’s like that, is it? I knew it!”

“What in the blazes are you talking about? Merry, don’t tell me you already know Lord Louis!” my father asked with a glare.

“Well, no matter. It seems as though they’re already old friends, Gazell. I’m sure they don’t want their old dads around getting in the way. Let’s let them talk in privacy.”

“Hey, wait a minute!” I could hear my father yelling as Uncle Romello dragged him out of the room. “Don’t change the subject!”

Now it was just me, Louis, and the servant who waited silently in the corner of the room.

“Did you know I was the one who’d be coming today?”

“I had no idea. I thought it was strange that Father was so forceful in ordering me to be here, but I had no idea it would be you, Merry...”

“So then you intended on being betrothed to the daughter of Marquis Anderson?” I knew it was a cowardly question.

“No. He ordered me to come, but he said I could decide whether or not I wanted to go through with the engagement once I met the girl. I was planning on turning it down.”

“What?” I tried to deconstruct the meaning of his sentence, but no matter how I parsed it, I kept taking it in a favorable meaning.

Meanwhile, Louis let out a deep sigh and collapsed into a chair. “He got the best of me again. He must’ve known this would happen all along.” He scratched his head, looking irritated. His forelock was tousled now, falling in front of his eyes. “Merry...” He let out another sigh and looked right up at me. His intense gaze made my body tremble. “I love you.”

It was like something inside my head exploded. Shyness and joy took over my brain, and my thoughts couldn’t keep up with reality.

“That’s why I was planning on turning down the engagement to Marquis Anderson’s daughter.”

He’d just given me a very passionate confession of his love, because his words meant that he hadn’t fallen in love with me because I was the daughter of a marquis. He fell in love with Merry, just as I was.

“Why? But you’re the Duke of Armelia’s son. You said you wanted to surpass your father. If that’s the case, wouldn’t it be a good idea for your future wife to come from a powerful family?” Of course, it was pointless to even ask such a question, but I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t change the fact that I was, indeed, from a very powerful family since I was the only daughter of House Anderson.

I didn’t think the gravity of that ever quite hit me until that exact moment, but now I was keenly aware that the blood which flowed through my veins was the blood of the militaristic House Anderson. But most of all, I was Father’s daughter, and he was called a hero. And that carried a great deal of clout within the aristocratic society. Well, that was if I could manage to conduct myself properly in a social setting, anyway. Putting that aside, there was something else I wanted to make certain.

Now that I knew the truth, perhaps there was no use in asking, but I wanted to hear it from Louis’s mouth. I asked him why.

“My goal has always been to surpass my father. But it’ll be meaningless unless I do it all on my own. I never intended on borrowing power from my future wife’s family. I was going to look for you, Merry. And I was going to tell you I loved you and ask you to take this journey with me.”

“Louis...” Suddenly my vision was blurred with tears. He didn’t love me for my family or because of my father’s reputation. He loved me for me.

“Honestly, I wanted to wait until my position was more stable until I told you—after I succeeded Father, even if I hadn’t achieved my goals yet. I wanted to be in a position where no one could complain about who I married. But, honestly... Father’s plan just blew all that out of the water.” He reached out his hand to me. “I love you, Merry. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want you to take my hand.”

I reached out my hand to take his. But then he spoke again, stopping me. “But first, I want you to think about something.” I froze at his suggestion. “I can’t change the path that I’m about to go down. If you choose to come with me, I’ll have to ask a lot from you. You’ll have to give up your dream. And I know how intently you chased it.”

Someone else might’ve thought that was selfish, being told “I won’t change my path, but you must change yours.” But I trusted him. He didn’t need to say it out loud, but he let me choose. Because he

knew me, and he knew that I'd have no problems with running away to avoid a marriage I didn't want.

"Promise me one thing, Louis."

"What is it?"

"If I join you, I don't want to be the one who's always protected. I want to do the protecting."

"And I want you to be yourself."

I smiled at his answer, and then I slowly took his hand. "It's true that if I marry you, I'll have to completely give up my dreams of joining the army. I know that. After all, the fiancée of the future Duke of Armelia can't be a soldier. I might not even be allowed to hold a sword again. But nevertheless, I am choosing to take your hand, by my own free will."

"Merry?"

"I thought about what we talked about at the tower that day—my dream and my wish. It's true that my dream was to protect people with my sword. But that wasn't the goal, that was the means. My goal, and my wish, is that no one will ever have to mourn the loss of someone special to them in the way that I did. I don't care what means it will take to achieve that goal."

"I see."

"I'll look for another way to make my dream come true, by your side. I want to walk through this life together with you. Once I heard about this engagement, all I could think of was you—I just couldn't settle my heart. Because I love you."

"Merry..."



He leaned forward, caressing my cheek with his hand. As his face came closer, I felt myself growing shy, so I closed my eyes. Our lips brushed lightly together. Feeling his soft, warm touch let me know this was real. Happy tears streamed down my face.

“Thank you,” he said. After he pulled away, he looked at me with a shy smile.

“I didn’t do anything worth thanking. I just did what I wanted.”

“I can’t hold a candle to you.”

He murmured something, but I couldn’t hear it. Before I could ask what he said, he started walking. “Well, should we go see General Gazell?”

“My father?”

“Yes. I have to ask for his blessing, after all. For your hand in marriage.”

“Why do you have to ask for his blessing when he’s the one who brought me here? He wouldn’t be here in the first place if he was against it.”

“Still, we have to go about things the proper way. He’s the father of the woman I love—and going to be my father-in-law. It’s just the thing to do.”

My face felt hot. I looked down to hide it and then quietly let him tug my hand and lead me out of the room. He knocked on a door and opened it. We were immediately greeted by the stench of liquor. I reflexively turned my nose up at the odor.

“Father, what in the world are you doing, drinking in the middle of the afternoon?!” Louis asked Uncle Romello.

“What does it look like? We’re celebrating. CE-LE-BRA-TING *someone’s* engagement to our adorable little Merry.”

Louis was so shy he was speechless.

“M-my little Merry... My little Merry!” Father started to weep as he knocked back another drink.

I appreciated the sentiment, but I was also furiously embarrassed. “Please forgive my father, Duke Armelia.”

“Don’t be so formal with me! You can keep on calling me Uncle

Romello all you want! And come on, Gazell. Calm down now. If you keep crying like that, you'll lose your voice."

"But, but Merry...!"

"You knew this was gonna happen. That's why you brought her here!" Uncle Romello said with a sigh.

"W-well, yes, but..."

"General Gazell." All of a sudden, Louis stepped toward them, interrupting their conversation. My father's pathetic expression dissolved in an instant, turning very severe as he looked at Louis. My father's face was now that of a general, with all of his power and ferocity. "Please give me your blessing to marry your daughter, Merellis Reiser Anderson."

"Do you love Merry? Do you swear to protect her?!"

"F-Father..." I raised my voice to stop him, but Louis lifted up a hand.

"Yes, I love her. She gives her all to everything she does. Having said that...I don't think I can protect her."

"What?"

"To put it simply, she's stronger than I am. My skills with a sword are at a hobbyist's level. In the worst-case scenario, I'd only be useful as a shield in front of her body."

Father looked at Louis sharply. His expression looked even scarier than when he was leading his army in training.

"Although I am inferior when it comes to weapons, I will hone my own skills in order to protect her. And I shall protect her with my own weapons."

My father remained silent for a while and then suddenly let out a deep sigh. "I see." he said in a resigned voice. "Romello! Come on! We're celebrating! We're gonna drink until morning in honor of your son! Join us, Lord Louis!" He turned around and yelled.

"All right! Let's drink till morning!"

"F-Father! You can't drink until morning. What about your work?! Speaking of work, I have some to attend to as well..."

"Father! We can't stay here until morning and cause trouble for the Armelias! And what about *your* work?"

“Lighten up, you two! Forget about work when there’s a celebration!”

No matter how much Louis and I tried to stop them, it was no use. In the end, they roped Louis into their celebration and the three of them began to drink.

Meanwhile, I had a feeling this wasn’t a proper place for a woman to be, so I decided to wait in another room. I hoped I could collect my father once he got drunk and then go home. I was happy that he was celebrating my engagement to Louis, but I was worried about my new fiancé. My father was a heavy drinker, after all.

I spent some time lost in my thoughts there for a while. I felt a happy peacefulness that I hadn’t enjoyed in a long time. An unconscious smile spread across my face. A servant made me some tea, and I was a bit shy to see the grin I had on my face in my reflection in the liquid.

“Oh, there you are.” There was a knock at the door, and a woman came in. She was very thin and pale. She looked so fragile that I couldn’t take my eyes off of her. I watched as she walked into the room and sat down across from me. “Hello, my future daughter. My name is Aurelia. Aurelia Lull Armelia. I am Romello’s wife and Louis’s mother.”

I was entranced by her, but now I was snapped back to reality. “I-It’s a pleasure to meet you! I’m Merellis Reiser Anderson! I-I’m looking forward to our future together!”

Lady Aurelia giggled softly. “My, aren’t you energetic? But I’ll have to take points off for that introduction.” Even though her voice never strayed from its soft tone, her words suddenly felt like ice. “It’s unsightly for a lady to speak in such a loud voice. You mustn’t speak so quickly either or else no one will understand you and it will make your guests uncomfortable.” She had a smile on her face, and yet chills ran down my spine.

But I knew I couldn’t let this deter me. I steeled my stomach and gazed back at her intensely. “Please forgive my rudeness. I was so thrilled to meet Your Grace that I forgot myself.”

At this, Lady Aurelia covered her mouth and giggled again. I wasn’t expecting that kind of reaction, and I just stared at her, unsure of what to do.

“My, that was funny! I’m sorry. I was just enjoying myself so much!” She kept laughing until there were tears in her eyes. She wiped

them away and then said, “I admire that competitive spirit of yours! But you shouldn’t show it so easily. You know what they say—the eyes are the windows to the soul.”

“Pardon me.”

“Merellis, I’ve heard a lot about you from my husband.” That meant she knew I hadn’t studied an ounce of etiquette and instead had devoted myself to the sword. Was she trying to say I wasn’t worthy enough to marry into the Armelia family? “Your past doesn’t matter. What matters now is the future. What I want to know is one thing; my husband has tasked me with your education. Will you work hard for me?”

I wondered why. Lady Aurelia’s mannerisms were gentle, and her smile was warm. And yet I felt an intensity from her that seemed to say, “If you marry into House Armelia, you must say yes. You’re prepared for that, aren’t you?” and wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“Of course. I know I have much to work on, but I’m looking forward to your guidance.” I wouldn’t let her intimidate me. I had a feeling she had not yet accepted me as Louis’s fiancée.

“Very well. I’m sure my husband is still in the other room, being disgraceful. I’ll be looking forward to seeing you here tomorrow.”

“As am I.” I left my presumably drunk father in the care of the Armelias and went back to House Anderson for the night.

Chapter 6: The Future Duchess Faces Forward

THE NEXT DAY, I visited the Armelia manor again. In case you were wondering, my father still hadn't come home. A messenger from House Armelia had arrived the night before and informed me that my father would be staying over.

Obviously, it was safer if he stayed there instead of trying to travel home drunk, so I agreed with his decision. Yet at the same time, I couldn't help feeling a little embarrassed on his behalf since I was going there now to learn etiquette.

I let out a sigh and lifted my gaze, staring at the Armelia mansion. My body was tense, just like if I were headed off to battle. My heartbeat pounded loudly in my ears. I breathed in a deep breath and let it out, trying to calm myself down. I couldn't shake the thought that I just wasn't good enough at this—the manners and etiquette, or perhaps even the entire world of high society itself.

It was something I'd avoided, giving the excuse that I didn't need it. However, now it was time to pay the price. I'd have to reveal to Lady Aurelia that I couldn't do even basic things that everyone else could. I just had to accept that fact. That had to be my talent right now. I knew it would be painful to be confronted with things I couldn't do, especially as the daughter of a noble.

Certainly it would be easy for me to say, "Well, I can't help it! I've devoted my life to the sword!" but unfortunately, I didn't have the nerve to say such a thing to my future mother-in-law. I didn't have the confidence.

When it came to ways of the sword, not being able to do something just meant you had the potential for growth. But when it came to etiquette, not being able to do something just seemed like an obstacle that I couldn't overcome. It dampened my enthusiasm. My feet suddenly froze.

I took another deep breath and then let it out. *Don't be afraid.* My pride was more than some little thing meant to protect my vanity. I chastised the part of myself that didn't want to move forward.

“All right...” I looked at the mansion again, strengthening my resolve, and then I went inside.

“Welcome, my lady. Please, let me show you inside.” The butler Alf was already waiting for me.

“Mr. Alf...”

“Lady Merellis, please just call me Alf.”

“All right then, Alf. Where is my father?”

“Master Gazell will be resting quietly here today.”

“I apologize for my father’s behavior.”

“Not at all, my lady! Master Romello always enjoys it when Master Gazell comes to visit.”

“I see...”

As we chatted, Alf led me through the house into a certain room where Lady Aurelia was.

“Welcome, Merellis. Shall we get started on our etiquette lesson?”

“Lady Aurelia, please allow me to first thank you for taking care of my Father. And I’m very looking forward to receiving your guidance today.”

“It’s no trouble at all. My husband enjoys his company. Actually, sometimes I feel rather sorry that he takes up so much of Master Gazell’s time. I know how busy your father is. Now, today we’ll be learning the proper etiquette for a tea party. It will be just you and me, but it will still be a good way for you to practice your skills.”

And so our tea party began. I previously had a crash course in tea parties since the queen had invited me to one so long ago, so I frantically tried to remember the details as I drank my tea and answered her questions.

“I can see that you do know the basics.”

“Hm?” I wasn’t expecting her to say that.

“By the way, Merellis, what do you think the goal of a tea party is?”

“Socialization?”

“Yes, that’s right. It’s a very important way that nobles develop their relationships with each other. Now, putting that aside, there are

some nobles who have tense faces and some with smiles on them. Which do you think are easier to talk to?"

"Well, the ones who are smiling, of course."

"Yes..." Lady Aurelia said with a perfect smile on her face. "Noble etiquette is complex, and not just at tea parties. I can understand why one would be nervous, especially when you're not used to it. That's why it's best for you get to the point where you aren't nervous and your body just naturally knows what to do." She picked up her teacup and took a sip. It was a very flowing, elegant gesture. "By the way, why do you think noble etiquette is so complex?"

"What?" I supposed I'd never thought about it before. I just thought it was complicated and too much trouble.

"Etiquette exists to make others more comfortable. Any word can be taken in a different way, depending on the listener. Even if you meant no harm by it, something could make the other person uncomfortable. And so we have manners and etiquette put in place with a long history behind them so that that won't happen. In addition, you may even meet important officials from other kingdoms, so diplomacy is another important skill for you to learn."

"I see..."

"Also, there are some people who complain that there are certain nobles who are obsessed with manners because they want to flaunt their power..." She had a wry smile on her face as if to say, *I can understand why they complain.*

I had a feeling that there were other reasons for manners such as these, which was why I'd thought it was such a pain.

"At any rate, there's no disadvantage to learning the ways of etiquette. So, first thing's first; let's fix some of your manners!" She smiled at me again. It was a friendly smile, and yet there was some indescribable intimidation behind it.

"A-all right."

"Let's begin."

After a very intense session with Lady Aurelia, I left the room. My body felt oddly fatigued, as if I'd used a bunch of muscles I didn't even know I had. "Ugh..." I grabbed my head and groaned as I walked down the hall.

“What’s wrong? Do you have a headache or something?” I heard Louis’s voice from behind me and I whirled around. I didn’t answer and just lowered my gaze.

“Are you okay?” He came closer and studied my face. He was so close I automatically pulled back. My head filled with yesterday’s events.

“I love you, Merry. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want you to take my hand.”

“I’ll look for another way to make my dream come true, by your side. I want to walk through this life together with you. Once I heard about this engagement, all I could think of was you—I just couldn’t settle my heart. Because I love you.”

Remembering that scene made my face burn with embarrassment. With a very delayed reaction, it suddenly hit me that not only had we confessed our love for one another, we were now engaged. I had no idea what to do with my emotions, and my brain just wouldn’t work properly.

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“What? Uh, um... I’m fine! I’m going home for today!” I turned around in the other direction and was about to retreat from this battle.

“Merry?” I heard his confused voice from behind me, but I was too embarrassed to stop. Now, I don’t know if what happened next was because I was just that flustered, or if it was because I was so unaccustomed to wearing dresses, but I tripped on my hem and lost my balance. I would’ve fallen flat on the floor if Louis hadn’t reached out and hooked his arm around my waist, catching me. “I’m very worried about you, Merry! Shall I call the doctor?”

He’s treating me like a woman. That was the first thing I realized. It gave me a rush of shyness, happiness, and excitement, almost as if I were drunk. “Th-thanks. But no, I’m fine.” I kept looking down, and then I felt his hand touch my hair, smoothing it into place. He came closer to take another look at me. But I turned my face away so he wouldn’t see how red it was.

“As long as you’re all right.” He let out a little sigh and then looked up. I could see a bit of tension to his face.

“I love you!” I shouted suddenly, startling him. *I-I’m mortified.* But

I couldn't back down. "I-I love you, and when you get too close, I get shy and I don't know what to do with myself!" I continued, squeezing my eyes shut because I was afraid of his reaction.

Silence continued for a while. And as the silence got heavier, I got even more scared of his reaction. I hesitantly opened my eyes, and then he burst out laughing.

"Louis?" He kept on laughing so I glared at him, despite my concern.

"Sorry, sorry," he said, but he continued to laugh anyway. I kept glaring at him, but who could blame me? "I feel the same way."

"You do?"

"Yes. I'm not sure how close to get to you. I get afraid that you might hate me if I touch you too much," he admitted shyly.

Now it was my turn to burst out laughing.

He pouted. "Don't laugh," he said, looking embarrassed. But the look on his face was so adorable I couldn't stop. I had never seen his expressions change so much. "Well, no matter," he said in a breezy tone with a smile on his face once more.

I leaned against his chest. I could hear his heart beating, and it was racing just as fast as mine was. We stayed like that for a while as I listened to his heartbeat, and he wrapped his arms around me. My embarrassment had left me, and now I felt a comforting sense of security.

"We'll get to know each other more little by little from now on, won't we?"

"Yes, we will."

I shifted slightly to look up at him. I smiled, and he smiled at me tenderly in return.

Gazell narrowed his eyes at the sunlight coming through the window. "Ahh, my head is killing me," he muttered to himself as he pressed a hand to his temple. He looked pale. The cause, of course, was a hangover. He poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher on the

bedside table and drained it one gulp. He changed his clothes and walked a bit slower than normal out of the guest room.

“Morning, Gazell.”

“Morning.”

Romello was already in the parlor.

“You look like you’ve had better days. Age even gets the best of heroes, eh?”

“I could say the same thing. You look pretty horrible yourself,” Gazell retorted. Romello chuckled wryly. “Your wife should be putting Merellis through the wringer right about now, hm?”

“Yes. She’s amazing. She’s got a lot of mental toughness.”

“I can imagine, considering she’s the one who holds your reins.”

“Ha ha ha. Guess you’re right. I’m sure Merry will be able to keep up.”

“Hmph. Of course she will,” Gazell grumbled proudly and then sank deep into the sofa. He grimaced. Perhaps his head was aching again. A servant waiting by the wall put another glass of water down on the table. The fact that it was water and not tea meant both of their conditions were quite obvious.

“Leave us,” Romello called to the servant, who bowed her head and excused herself from the room.

“Thanks for this!” Gazell called to her with a friendly grin before she left.

“All right, enough jokes. Let’s get serious,” Romello said.

Gazell’s smile instantly vanished from his face. “Is this about Wels?” His gaze grew sharp, his demeanor so intense that anyone watching would have no idea he was under the weather.

“Yes. It’s about your younger brother.”

“Has he made a move since then?”

“He’s been quiet for a while. No major movements.”

“I see...”

“But he’s done quite a number on things. I tried to continue the investigation into the mines, and unfortunately, I haven’t found out any concrete information.”

“Hrm.”

“Also, I confirmed that the mercenaries are not being funneled to another domain.”

“And how did you do that?”

“Most people who work as mercenaries generally work in security or as general contractors, and they’d be registered as such with the governor. I checked to see if any of the registered people had particularly shady backgrounds. Anyway, I confirmed that he hasn’t added to his forces.”

During the war with Tweil, the mercenaries had come in under the guise of being general contractors. After the war, many domains were short-staffed when it came to rebuilding efforts and were already looking for workers, so the mercenaries used that opportunity to enter the kingdom. That was how he was able to get so many mercenaries—from the general contractors.

“I see...”

“I’m checking over the information we receive from checkpoints in the domains, but so far, we haven’t seen anything unusual in the flow of people in and out. I ordered an investigation into the distribution of goods and their prices with each commerce guild, but the number of products sold at market haven’t increased, and the prices haven’t gone up. In other words, the amount of consumption has not changed. If there were more people coming into the domain, that wouldn’t be the case, you see?”

“You looked into that all on your own?” Gazell asked with surprise, as anyone else would. Just hearing about it made it clear just how much work had gone into doing all this background research.

“Sorry to disappoint you, but it was actually Louis. I had other matters to attend to.”

“Lord Louis did?!” Gazell exclaimed, even more surprised now. His reaction exacerbated his hangover, and he grimaced, then downed his glass of water in one gulp.

“Yes. Of course I looked over the reports to make sure they all matched up, but Louis was in charge of the investigation.” Romello gave a wry chuckle.

“That’s amazing for his age.” Gazell smiled dryly.

“Anyway, it’s possible that your brother is hiding out in a remote area. I’ll need more manpower to investigate in that case. And obviously, they’ll have an excuse as to why there are so many people coming in, so it’ll take some time.”

“I bet.”

“Also...I thought about what your brother’s motive could be. He was supposed to take over as head of your house once, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Well, that could certainly be why. Perhaps the reason he’s gathering up mercenaries is to incite internal strife within House Anderson.”

“Earlier, you suspected that I was colluding with my brother. Why was that?”

“I was just covering all my bases. Because of your reputation as a hero, you’ve got a lot of power and influence in this kingdom, especially over the military. And to be frank, I was suspicious about you distancing yourself from the royal family. The other domains had decreased their number of mercenaries across the board, so it was strange that only your house had added to their numbers little by little.”

“I see...”

“Anyway, putting that aside... I’m sure you want to take care of the problems in your own domain, and we don’t want to lose you as an ally either. I’ll continue investigating.”

“I owe you one.”

“But you know it’s not enough to just sniff Wels out, right? If you won’t make a move, then I’ll mobilize my troops and kill him.” Romello’s lighthearted attitude was gone, now replaced by the mask of the prime minister.

Gazell looked just as serious. “But...!” He objected, lifting his face and glaring at Romello. The room was filled with an understandable tension. These two men shouldered most of the responsibilities of the kingdom. They both silently stared at each other as if to say neither would back down.

“Why would you protect him? He killed your wife and tried to do the same to your children,” Romello asked with a sigh, easing the mood in the room. Yet his tone of voice still sounded like they were in the

imperial court, so he was continuing to play the part of prime minister.

“I’m not trying to protect him.”

“You are, though. Either you use your power as a domain lord, hire an assassin, or use your own overwhelming power as a warrior. It doesn’t matter how you do it. Basically, it would be faster if you killed him, not me.”

Gazell raised a trembling hand to his head after hearing that suggestion.

Romello continued. “Right now, Wels is suspected of aiding and abetting the murder of Marchioness Anderson, the attempted murder of the children of the marquis of House Anderson, and of the serial kidnappings of noble children in the capital. Since you’ve seen the evidence, you know that we have proof that he had your wife killed and attempted to kill your children. But since he was so careful, we only have circumstantial evidence regarding the kidnappings.”

“You think it’ll be difficult to try him?”

“Not exactly. I think the charges would stand in court, though maybe not the kidnappings. But I would rather prioritize defending yourself. If this came to light, it could damage House Anderson’s reputation, which could in turn tarnish your image.”

“Huh? You care more about my reputation than the law?”

“Laugh if you want to, but you know as well as I do that we can’t continue letting him run wild. This is happening within your domain, so you need to take care of it quickly. And you should care more about your reputation.”

“My reputation...”

“Don’t tell me you don’t care about it.” Romello glared at Gazell. “Listen. Like I just told you, your name is enough to keep other kingdoms from attacking us. The fact of the matter is Tasmeria still hasn’t healed from the wounds we endured during the war with Tweil. Do you hear that? Not at all! That’s why we can’t let other kingdoms think they have even the slightest chance to take advantage of us! There are many fools who don’t understand that. There are those who are watching your every move in hopes of overthrowing you because they’re jealous of your reputation as a hero! You mustn’t allow your house to be divided on account of internal strife or to be subjected to a

lengthy court battle!” Romello banged on his desk.

His irritation didn't seem to be stemming from anger toward Gazell but more that the kingdom hadn't healed from the damages from the war with Tweil. The proof of that was the pained look on his face as he had started his explanation.

“Why are you so upset?” Gazell asked, noticing it too.

Romello realized what his friend meant, and a self-deprecating smile spread across his face. “Isn't it obvious? My job is to protect the kingdom—to ensure a stable life for its citizens. In other words, my job is to prevent us from going to war. And yet I couldn't stop that one. I was a completely powerless prime minister.”

“It wasn't your fault. No one could've foreseen what happened.”

“Not my fault? Maybe that's easy for you to say, but there was a lot of bloodshed because of it. It was all because I wasn't able to perform my duties. That's why I can't forget the sacrifices that were made. And another thing I can't forget is the fact that I cannot allow it to happen again!” His vehemence was bloodcurdling. It was clear how serious the man was about this matter.

Gazell bowed his head, as if he were no match for Romello's intensity. His body trembled slightly.

“I wonder why...?” Gazell continued with a murmur, after a spell of silence. His voice was so weak and small it was hard to believe it was coming from the general. “I vowed to send every last person responsible for Merelda's death to hell myself. It was what kept me going. I had every intention of destroying the mastermind behind it all.” His body shook more and more with every word. Although Romello couldn't see his friend's face, it was clear that his entire body was shuddering with sobs. “I hate Wels. I want to kill him! He's the one who stole my Merelda away from me!”

Romello could muster no words; he just looked at the general with pity. Gazell was always so heroic and strong, but now his friend looked so frail.

“Do you have any idea what it's like to be terrified that the memories you shared with the woman you love will fade? Her smile, her soft voice... I once remembered it all so vividly—I loved her so much—but time is a merciless thief, stealing memories away! And yet I can still remember as clear as if it were yesterday how she looked lying

there, covered in blood. And I still blame myself to this day for not being able to protect her!”

So then why? Romello was about to ask but thought better of it. The mood in the air was just too heavy. But it wasn’t the same kind of intensity he himself had been putting out earlier. The mood had shifted and was representing Gazell’s mental state; the air was so tense, he was afraid one wrong word would push him over the deep end.

“And yet the memories I have of Wels and my feelings for him make me hesitate! No matter what, he was still a precious family member!” He yelled, pushing out his words with difficulty. “Laugh if you want to. After all, I talked up how I would get revenge to everyone...and now you see how weak I really am,” he said in a self-deprecating tone.

After a quiet pause in the room, Romello’s tone was strangely calm. “It is quite funny.”

Gazell suddenly froze.

“I’d already made up my mind. I went through all the possibilities to see which one had the least amount of risk—what I could give up, what I should keep. Although it would be ideal to keep everything, reality doesn’t work out that way. I was always making calculations in my mind to see where I would draw the line, even though that thought process itself was giving up. No matter how precious a memory is to me, I’ll abandon it if it’s necessary to do so.”

No one could blame Romello for his philosophy. He constantly had to make difficult decisions as the prime minister. Sometimes his options were limited, and he truly had a hard time deciding what to do. That was the case most of the time, frankly. Each time this happened, he went over the options again and again, trying to figure out if there was a way to make all concerned parties satisfied—or perhaps another alternative that he hadn’t considered yet.

It was rare when he found a solution like that, though. Romello had to wear a mask of ruthless calm each time and choose the path that had the fewest sacrifices, even if some of them included something precious.

“I wonder how much I’ve sacrificed thus far. Of course, I’ve never had regrets, but sometimes I have to think, ‘If I hadn’t given this up then, what would’ve happened?’ If I were in your position, I probably

would've made my decision right away to give up one or the other. But you can't. To put it simply, you can't abandon anything because you love the memories of the past and cherish them. It's just so very like you that I just have to laugh." That was the way Gazell had always been, in a good way. He cherished each memory, putting each one away like a gemstone in a treasure box. He carried the box with him, trying not to spill its contents.

But inside Romello stood a pillar of conviction, and even treasures looked insignificant before it. His conviction was so solid that he could throw away the most priceless objects if need be.

The two men were very different. Although Romello had no regrets about the decisions he'd made in the past, he was a bit envious of the way Gazell was. That was why he'd spoken to his friend with a smile.

Gazell slowly lifted his gaze. His eyes searched Romello's, waiting for him to answer.

"Well, in the end, this is a family matter. I'll let you take care of it," Romello said with a sigh. He was no longer speaking in a formal tone. "But if I sense that he's even *thinking* of making a move, I'm going to deploy my soldiers without hesitation. And if you don't respond in an appropriate amount of time, then I'll take the initiative."

"All right... I'm sorry," Gazell hung his head, unable to say anything else. He knew how much Romello had conceded for him. "I promise I'll take care of it, no matter what I have to do." Gazell still looked frail, but now he had determination in his eyes.

"All right, stop." Lady Aurelia clapped her hands, and I froze. "Merellis, your posture is very good. Perhaps it's because of your sword training?" I smiled and tipped my head to the side vaguely. Although she had phrased it in the form of a question, I had a feeling she didn't actually want me to answer. "However, your movements are too quick and brisk. If there were a reason for you to move quickly, that would be fine, but that isn't what we're looking for in high society. We want *elegance*. We don't want each movement to be clipped. Think of each gesture flowing into the next. Like this..." She stood up and slowly

shifted into a curtsy.

This was nothing like anything I had done before. Although she was wearing quite casual clothes today, the way she moved made her seem like she was wearing a fancy ball gown. After her demonstration, she sat back down.

“Now, shall we start once more from the beginning?”

I felt like I was undergoing some sort of terrible torture as I began moving again.

I had foreign language lessons in the morning, a break for lunch, and then etiquette lessons in the afternoon. By the time I was done, the sun would be starting to set. I was concentrating so deeply that time flew by. Honestly, at first, I was incredibly exhausted by the end of each day since I was so unaccustomed to these lessons.

But now, I was focusing so much that I hardly noticed how quickly time was passing. That must mean I’d gotten quite used to Lady Aurelia’s lessons by now.

Just then, she put a cup of tea in front of me. “Nice work today. Go ahead and take a break.”

“Thank you so much for today’s lessons.” I slowly sipped the tea.

“This tea is from Salville, an area in the southern part of your homelands—southern Anderson.” Even after all our lessons were over and we were relaxing with tea, Lady Aurelia still tried to teach me things.

Putting that aside, I was a bit embarrassed that I had never known a city in southern Anderson produced tea leaves. What in the world had I learned until now? *Oh, right. The sword*, I told myself. *And there’s no use in being depressed about it now.*

I lifted my head. “It’s very good. I’m embarrassed to admit that this is the first time I learned tea is grown in my own domain.”

“Oh? The Anderson march is known for its honey and mining resources, is it not?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“This tea has become popular in the capital recently. I’ve heard it was very carefully cultivated in one area. It’s highly regarded as being very delicious when combined with the honey from march Anderson.”

“I see.”

“Popularizing items is another important job for wives and children in high society.” There was a strength in Lady Aurelia’s eyes that was hard to believe came from such a frail body. “Take these tea leaves, for example. Now that they’ve become popular, the tea fields in Salville have expanded, which in turn provides more jobs for the citizens there. When people have a steady source of income, an area becomes a safer place to live in. When it turns a profit, that can lead to even more business. We’re tasked with the very important responsibility of trying to make our domains more prosperous.”

“A safer place?” I repeated.

“Yes, that’s right. In order to live, one must have a stable source of income, and one needs a stable job for that. When there aren’t enough jobs, people resort to stealing and committing crimes. It starts with small things in order to get by, and public safety declines. That, in turn, corrupts the peoples’ hearts. It’s a vicious cycle. Of course, there are many more causes than just that, but it is a big one. It’s important to maintain safety for the people and to cut off the roots of instability. That’s the job of a governor, and his wife will support him in doing so.”

Cut off the roots of instability. That line stuck with me. I thought about what Louis and my brother said, and how that could lead me to realizing my own dream.

“That’s why we have to be sensitive to the things that are in fashion. What do people want at the markets? What do they need? That’s where you start. What do they say about how to win a war—know thyself, know thy enemy? It’s precisely the same thing.”

“May I ask you something?” Lady Aurelia just smiled quietly at my question. I took that as a yes, so I continued. “As you know, I haven’t made my debut into high society. My mother has passed away, and my father certainly doesn’t know about anything that’s in fashion. I have an older brother, but he’s away at the academy so he doesn’t have much occasion to show up at formal gatherings. So who in the world made these tea leaves so popular?”

Her smile deepened at my question. “I asked my husband if there was anything that could facilitate your lessons. It just so happened that the thing I was searching for was also being sought after at the markets.”

Of course she wouldn't come right out and tell me it was her, but those words were evidence enough.

"I see. Thank you so much for the wonderful lesson."

She just smiled softly in return.

Now that my class was over, I excused myself from the room and headed toward the foyer. I'd slowly gotten to know my way around the mansion coming here every day. No one had to show me around anymore. That made me very happy, as a future member of this family.

"Oh, Merry!" I heard a familiar voice and turned to see Uncle Romello.

"Unc—I mean, Lord Romello." Without thinking, I'd started to call him by my usual nickname for him but then corrected myself.

"I told you, you can keep calling me Uncle. Having you be formal with me after all this time just makes me feel shy."

I had to let out an inward chuckle because it still seemed so strange that he was in this mansion. "I have a lot to learn, and I know that because I keep using your nickname without thinking. Please have patience with me until I get accustomed to calling you Lord Romello."

"All right, then. Still, you sure have changed, Merry. Is Aurelia being too hard on you?"

"Lady Aurelia's lessons are very valuable, but I will admit that they are quite tough."

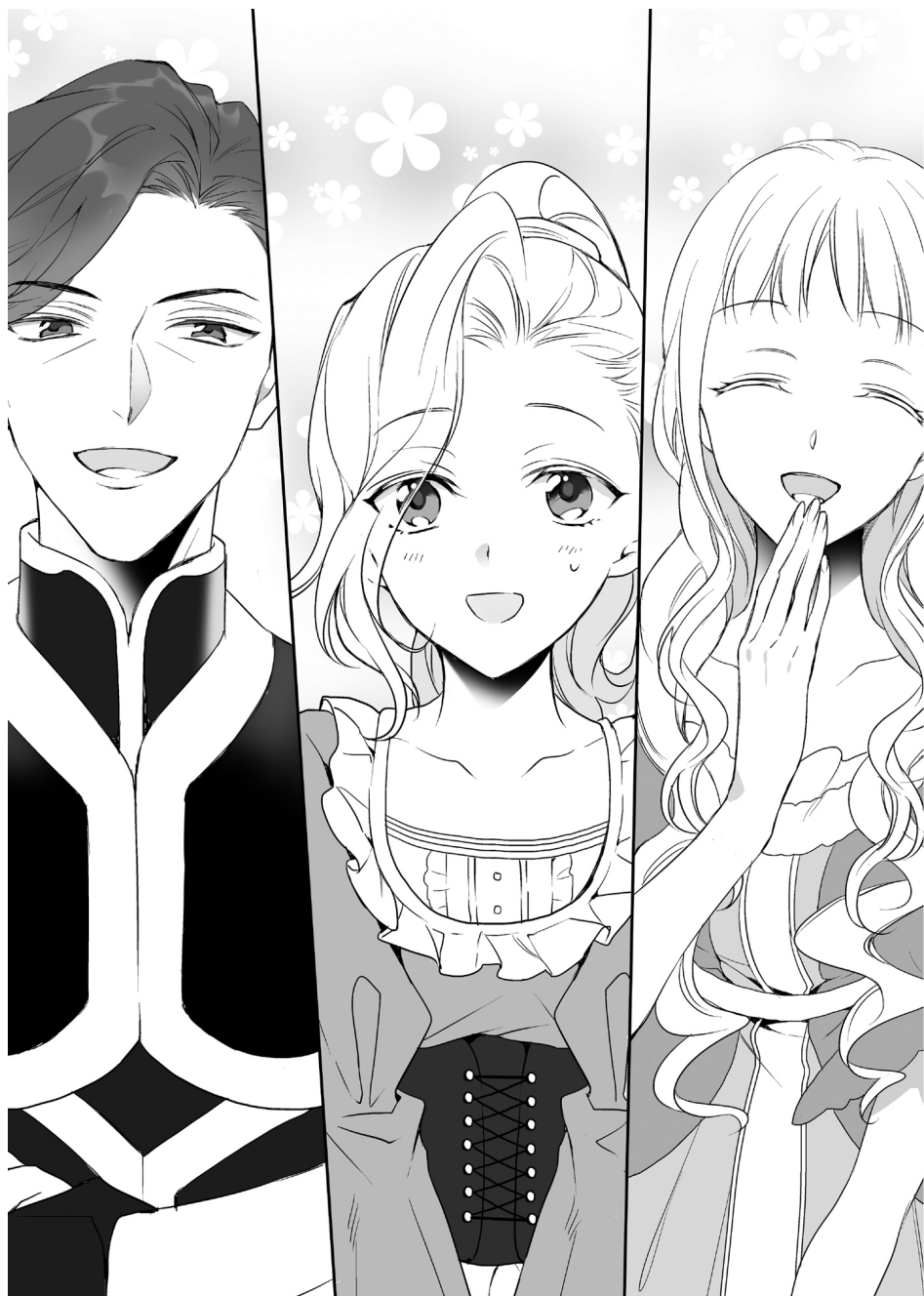
"I see. You must have nerves of steel."

"Thank you for the compliment."

"Ha ha ha. Yes, I see she's trained you well. She says you're a very fast learner."

"Oh?" I couldn't help but grin when I heard the unexpected compliment.

"She's quite strict when it comes to manners, but she always looks thrilled when she talks about you. She says you're a very strong young lady."



Since it was Lady Aurelia saying it, I knew she meant I was mentally strong, not physically strong. And I was genuinely happy to hear that she thought so highly of me. Because my mental toughness was the only weapon I had right now.

“Well, keep up the good work. I’m sure it must be nerve-racking heading into a completely different battlefield than you’re used to. But I know you’re strong and you can get through it. Well, if you’ll excuse me. Sorry I kept you.” He smiled at me and walked down the hall.

I bowed again and watched him leave. I stared absently at his back, thinking how busy he must be. His tone of voice was easygoing as usual, but he had faint circles beneath his eyes. I thought that he must be fighting battles of his own. I wondered what was going on with House Armelia. At the same time, I wanted to punch my past self—the person I was before I got engaged.

Even if I was only seeing a fraction of their true selves right now, the Armelias were definitely nobles—different from how I imagined, but *real* nobles. They knew exactly what their responsibilities were, and I deeply respected them for that.

I hoped that I could become a fitting bride for this family. I *had* to. I made up my mind to make that wish come true, no matter what.

“Merry. What are you doing, just standing here?” Once again, I heard a familiar voice that snapped me back to reality.

“Louis! Sorry. I was just thinking.”

“All right. I was just making sure you were okay.”

Louis had recently started the academy, so in honesty, I had only seen him a handful of times since I started coming here every day. That made me feel a little sad. Still, I couldn’t be selfish when I knew he was working so hard.

“Do you have some time right now?”

“Hm? The carriage is waiting for me, but I don’t have any plans after this.”

“Good. Come with me.” He took my hand and led the way. It was the same hand that held mine when I got lost in town. I couldn’t help but smile when I felt the warmth coming from his hand. At the same time, my cheeks felt hot.

Louis led me to a garden. He sat me down on a bench at the edge of it and then sat next to me.

“These flowers bloom every year right around now. I’ve been wanting to show them to you, so I’m glad I was able to.” Now I was blushing even more. “How are your lessons going?”

“I think it’s more like training. I’m learning a lot though. Learning something new every day is a lot more fun than I expected.”

“It is pretty fun,” he said, with a little smile.

“I can’t imagine there’s anything you don’t know, Louis.”

“What are you talking about? The world is full of things I don’t know. For example, I had no idea you were the daughter of Marquis Anderson.”

“When you say it like that, I have no choice but to agree with you.”

“Ha ha ha. I suppose so.”

I pouted a little, and he reached out to stroke my hair.

“How’s the academy?”

“It’s very interesting. I don’t have many opportunities to gather with people my own age outside of school. Pax is helping me a lot.”

“Oh? Do you see my brother often?”

“Not too much, since we’re not in the same year. But we’ve talked now and then since I told him about our engagement.”

“Oh...”

I wouldn’t be able to see my brother at the academy because he would graduate before I’d start going there. I bet he was totally different at school. I adored my brother, so I did have to admit I was a bit curious.

Louis touched my hair and said, “Your hair is longer now.”

“Yes, I’m growing it out. What do you think?” Louis had only ever seen me with short hair. I sat up straighter in my seat.

“It looks good on you. You look wonderful with short hair and long hair.”

“Hee hee... That’s sweet of you, thanks.”

A gust of wind blew my hair off my shoulders.

“Are you sleeping well, Louis?” I was relieved that he didn’t have dark circles under his eyes like his father did.

“Where did that come from, all of a sudden?”

“I noticed that Lord Romello has dark circles under his eyes. And if he’s busy, I figured you must be busy as well helping him.”

“Don’t worry. I’m young, unlike my father. Even if I work hard, my body can take it.”

“There you go again. Don’t come crying to me if you collapse from exhaustion.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

“You can’t just thank me. You need to do as I say!” I retorted, and he laughed again.

“You win this round. Fine, I’ll do my best to do as you say.”

“Honestly. I had this image of nobles that they were so prideful. But I suppose I’m a noble too, though.” I said with a sheepish chuckle. “My impression of them has changed since I came here. I’m actually embarrassed that I thought such a thing. I was judging people by their appearances.”

“There are some nobles who are like that. Perhaps if our positions were different, they’d see us in a different light. Impressions are a scary thing. You can form an opinion about someone that isn’t accurate after just a glimpse of them.”

That was true. It was frightening to think someone could think they know you when they didn’t and make judgments about you. And if you were to let other people’s opinions get to you, it could color the way you viewed yourself too. When you didn’t see the individual differences in people in a group, could you really say proudly that you’d judged them correctly?

I would be interacting with all sorts of people from now on, and I couldn’t forget those things when I made judgments about them.

“It’s painfully true.”

“But you’re still training now, right, Merry? So it’s fine as long as you’re happy learning something new.”

“Ha ha ha. It’s true. Hey, Louis? I’ve got a strange question to ask

you..." I glanced up at him. He didn't seem to object, so I continued. "Why does everyone in House Armelia try so hard to be proper nobles?"

"What do you mean, 'why'? What do you think nobles are supposed to do?"

"I don't know. What?" The ideal noble in my mind right now was Lady Aurelia. She thoroughly understood her own responsibilities and was trying to be useful to her people. But that wasn't all there was to being a noble. I realized that I didn't have a solid idea of what a noble should be yet. "I'm sorry, let me rephrase that. Why do you always act in the best interest of the citizens?"

"I wonder why... It's just normal in my family. I don't know how else to answer that. I supposed if I had to give you a proper answer, I'd say that getting to know the citizens made me realize a lot of things."

"The people of Armelia?" I asked, and that made sense to me.

Lord Romello and my father had met at a tavern in town, after all. And I'd met Louis in town too. I supposed I never sat down to think about it, but it did seem strange now that I knew they were from House Armelia. No one in their right mind would expect that the head of the most important noble house and his successor were just walking around in town with everyone else. I was no exception.

"It's difficult to improve a situation and create something new when you don't know anything about it, right? But I think the moment where I decided on my path was when I went to see the ruins of the battlefields from the war with Tweil."

I wouldn't have been surprised if his reason was for the sake of the government, though. I had learned a lot going into town myself and interacting with people. After all, I'd found my purpose through those experiences as well.

"I see..."

"I think it's strange that you think it's strange."

"Do you? Why's that?"

"Because you decided to protect people so they wouldn't go through the same thing you did. What other noble's daughter in this world would be able to survive the fierce General Gazell's training for that purpose?" Louis asked, and I chuckled wryly.

"Well, in my case...I had a different motivation pulling me

through tough training compared to other people.”

“I suppose you’re right. Well, I’ve admired you ever since.”

“What?”

“No matter what your goal was, I’m not sure how many people have made it through General Gazell’s training. It’s certainly popular, but it’s also infamous for being incredibly tough and strict.”

I’d only ever been trained by my father from the very beginning, so I really had nothing else to compare it to. Honestly, I wondered what it was like to train with someone else. But I’d never have the chance to find out, of course.

“That’s why I know that any soldier who trains under General Gazell is the cream of the crop. Anyway, putting that matter aside, a girl younger than me with such a strong will endured training that grown men have run away from. Once I learned that about you, I really gained a lot of respect for you. And your very presence just made an impression on me.”

“Thank you...”

Louis smiled softly and stroked my hair. That smile of his was really bad for my heart. I glanced away and let out a sigh. He usually had such a sharp aura about him that when he did show a glimpse of that softness, it made my heart pound out of control. I still wasn’t sure why it made my heart race so.

“Do you come here often, Louis?”

“Yes. I come to give reports to my father, but sometimes I come here just for a little break. It’s very calming to be around nature, you know? When I need a change of pace I often come and spend time in the garden.”

I closed my eyes and listened to the sound of the wind. The flowers were dancing and the trees were singing. I opened my eyes and I saw the light of the sun illuminating the beautiful flowers. It reminded me of a spotlight shining down upon the star of the show.

“It is very beautiful and peaceful here.”

He reached out and gently placed a hand on my cheek. “That’s a nice smile on your face.”

“What?” I stared at him dumbfounded for a moment, not sure

what he meant.

“You’ve changed since you began lessons with Mother. Before, you were always tense and even your smile felt a little dark. But now it’s different, probably because you’re learning new things and gaining new skills. Still, I want you to know that you don’t have to lose the good things about yourself.”

“The good things?”

“There are a lot of them, you know. Your faithfulness as you work toward your goals. How you cry and laugh so genuinely. And even the skills you learned training with your sword.”

“But...I can’t be like how I was back then. Right?” I, like my hair, had grown a little.

“That’s true. You’re going to be dealing with a lot of different people from now on, and sometimes you’ll have to suppress parts of yourself to fit in with the group. You’ll have to construct a thick mask and wear it a lot of the time. But not in front of me. You don’t have to wear a mask with me. You can just be yourself.”

“Louis...”

I wasn’t expecting him to say that, especially because since I’d started lessons with Lady Aurelia, I realized just how far from being a proper noble’s daughter I actually was. I thought I had to suppress my true nature. I thought that was necessary in order to continue down this path. But Louis said it wasn’t. He validated me. And he loved me just as I was.

“I know it’s a selfish request,” he said with a sheepish grin.

“Selfish? Why?”

“I was the one who dragged you down this path, and yet I’m also the one asking you not to change. And, of course, everything changes.”

“That’s true. Nothing can stay the same.” I placed my hand over his. “But I really appreciate you saying that it’s all right to be myself. I needed to hear that from you. I needed to hear that I didn’t have to throw away everything I’d worked so hard for.”

One of a noble’s weapons was her etiquette. Lady Aurelia had taught me that. I felt like I had been prioritizing the mask I was constructing. I reached down and gently kissed his hand. “Thank you, Louis.”

Louis clasped my own hand and brought it up to his mouth to lay a kiss on it. "Shall I prepare a place for you to train here?" He leaned in so close our noses were almost touching and murmured.

"Really?!"

"Didn't you believe what I just said?"

"Of course I did. But are you sure?"

"Of course."

"Thank you, Louis!" I was so thrilled that I threw my arms around him.

"I know that it'll be very hard for you here from now on. But I don't want you to bottle things up. Please come to me for whatever you need. And I'll be leaning on you too," Louis said, resting his head on my shoulder.

The weight and warmth of his head on me felt so very nice. "All right."

Now I felt like I could do my best. I *wanted* to do my best, so that I could stay by his side.

A few days later...

I was heading to my father's study to see him for the first time in a while. He'd been very busy lately, plus I had been going to the Armelias' mansion every day, so we hadn't had much occasion to see each other. I had a lesson with Lady Aurelia today too, but my father had a rare day off.

"May I talk to you, Father?" I knocked on the door and opened it, peeking my head in to ask. It used to be custom in our house to announce yourself as you entered, according to proper etiquette. Since Father had spent so much time in the military, he thought announcing himself was a waste of time though. I supposed I could understand that, since every second was important on the battlefield. If you wasted time announcing yourself before you entered, it could delay vital information. So at some point, we did away with that custom in our household. In fact, I was so used to it that I wasn't even aware that it

wasn't typical until Lady Aurelia pointed it out during our etiquette lessons. She told me that they didn't announce themselves in the Armelia household either. That was probably due to the fact that the generations of prime ministers in their family were so busy with their duties that they also didn't want to waste time.

"...Enter."

"Excuse me." I went inside and saw that my father was surrounded by a stack of documents, which was unusual for him. It was normal for him to be at his desk, but with only a small number of reports from the march and military documents.

"What is it, Merry?"

"I have a question for you." Father rose from his seat and walked over to me as I continued. "Why were you so insistent on my engagement to House Armelia?"

"Where'd that come from?"

"I've been wondering for a while now why you were so pushy about it. Because most of the time, you wouldn't care about making us do things solely for the good of the family."

"How can you be so sure? You know I am a noble too."

"Still, Father. That's just not the person I've known you to be. Surely you must have a reason."

"I don't have any particular one. I just feel like I can trust Romello's son to take care of you, that's all."

"Really?"

"You certainly are persistent today. Do you have a problem with your engagement to Lord Louis?"

"Of course not! I can't wait to marry him!"

Father let out a sigh of relief when he heard my answer. "Then what's the problem? Who cares how it happened as long as you're with a man who makes you light up like that?"

Light up? I wondered. I reached up and touched my own face. But obviously I couldn't tell just by touching it. I wouldn't know unless I saw myself in a mirror.

"By the way, Father. I'm going to be starting to train again."

“What are you talking about? You—”

“Louis said that I could. He told me he wants me to be myself. So, Mer will be making a return.”

“Well, I certainly won’t disagree with Lord Louis. You do know he’s about the only fiancé who’d allow such a thing, aren’t you?”

“I’m sure you’re right.” I’d never heard of any daughter of a high-ranking noble swinging a sword either, that was for sure. Even though I was part of the militaristic House Anderson, I didn’t think such a thing would be allowed in House Armelia. I paused for a moment. “Don’t tell me you had a hunch he would say that, and that’s why you pushed the engagement?”

“Are you still going on about that? The answer is no. I didn’t even know Lord Louis before, although it seems you did. Where did you meet him, anyway?”

“It was when we first came to the capital. You remember how I was in a slump back then? I kept losing my sparring matches, and I wasn’t making much progress with my training. I was so depressed, and after I lost to Donalti, I just exploded. I ran out of the house into town. And that’s when I met him.”

“Ah, so he knew you as Mer.”

“That’s right.”

“I see. I’m sure Romello was aware of it. That scoundrel.” Despite his name-calling, my father had an amused smile on his face. “I’m glad he gave you permission to train. But Lady Aurelia is going to so much trouble giving you lessons, so don’t neglect those.”

“I know that.”

“I’m sure you’ll do just fine. After all, you’ve got Merelda’s blood running through your veins.” Suddenly, Father had a sad look in his eyes.

“How did you and Mother meet?”

“What in the world has gotten into you today? You just keep asking me one ridiculous question after another.”

“What’s wrong with it? I’ve never asked you before now, and since I’m engaged, I’m curious about how my parents met.”

“Is that so... Well, I met Merelda on the battlefield after the

fighting was over. I was tying up loose ends, and she was tending to the injured.”

“The daughter of a baron was tending to the wounded?”

“Yes. She had never studied medical treatment, and yet there she was, changing bandages and feeding people. There’s a lot to do after a battle, and she led the charge. She didn’t have a single swipe of makeup on her. She worked tirelessly to care for the people. She even stayed late at night by their sides as they cried out in pain in their sleep, without anyone telling her to. Before long, I realized my eyes just kept drifting over to her. Of course, I wasn’t a general back then, just a captain. I often stayed to look after the men in my regiment, and so she and I got to talking. There were others in my regiment who were quite fond of her as well.”

“And then you told her you loved her?”

“I proposed to her.”

“Goodness! That was awfully bold of you!”

“I couldn’t imagine myself with anyone but her. She said yes, and we got engaged. But after that, I went home and was told I was going to become a general and take over the Anderson family. Many people objected to our marriage, and it was a rough time. The people in my family were especially against it. There was a lot of discord inside the family back then too.”

Father had a lighthearted tone of voice as he spoke, but the subject was very heavy.

“To her, the Anderson family name was a set of heavy shackles, and the house of marquis a dungeon cell. She’d lived her life so freely, but I was the one who dragged her into this world. Still, she chose to walk side by side with me. And she worked very hard to bring honor to herself as a marchioness to silence our critics.”

Father reached out and stroked my hair. His touch was gentle, but his smile was sad.

“You have her blood in you. You have her same strong will that I fell in love with. The blood of a kind, beautiful woman runs through your veins, so there’s nothing for you to fear. No matter what kinds of obstacles may lie in your path, I know you can overcome them. I’m sure of it.”

“Thank you, Father.”

In the end, he never answered my original question, but I was satisfied because I got to hear stories about my mother.

It was bright and sunny, and I had the day off from lessons, so I decided to go train. I was dressed as Mer, of course.

“Shrey! Long time no see! Hm? This is it for people here today?” I looked around, confused.

“Yes. Today, training is only open to the house guard. Kreuz was pretty disappointed because he heard that you’d be here. He was muttering on about how he wanted to show you how much he improved since he saw you last.”

“Ha ha. I’ve been slacking off on my training, so I wouldn’t have been a very worthy opponent for him!”

“You haven’t been training? Have you been ill?”

“No, it’s not that.” I certainly couldn’t tell him I’d gotten engaged.

“Well, that’s good, at least. You’d better be prepared though. I’ll give that stiff body of yours a workout!”

“Bring it on!”

It didn’t take long for my muscles to scream out since I hadn’t trained for so long. After we were done with basic training, my body felt languid with fatigue. I was panting too. Not only that, but before I was able to easily predict the movements of my opponent and respond, but now my reactions were several seconds too late. And that could mean a fatal mistake in battle. I had also grown since the last time I trained, so the picture I had of myself in my mind didn’t match the current reality. That was probably partly the reason why I was having so much difficulty.

“It’s no use. Being away from training for even a little bit dulls my senses, but most of all my body just can’t move like it used to,” I muttered to myself as I wiped away my sweat. Since I had Louis’s permission, I vowed to start coming to train more regularly from now on.

“Hey, hey. Are you serious right now?” I heard an exasperated sigh and a familiar voice behind me.

I whirled around. “Kreuz! I thought today training was closed to everyone but the house guard!”

“I had some business with the general. I was gonna ask Shrey to go for drinks on my way home, but I didn’t expect to see *you* here.”

“It’s been a long time.”

“It sure has. More importantly—you haven’t trained in a long while, have you?”

“That’s right. I wasn’t aware you knew that. I haven’t been here in a bit, right?”

“Yeah... Well, yeah! So what’s the deal with that?!” He pointed to the pile of bodies behind me. Shrey was among them.

“Well, they were kind enough to spar with me.”

“Your skills haven’t dropped at all!”

“That’s not true. Those who sparred with me will understand, but my attacks were lighter and my responses were slower. I’m familiar with their fighting styles, so I still managed to pull out a win, but I doubt I’d be able to say the same with someone I’d never gone up against before.”

“I think it’s more than enough that you can win against the members of the Anderson house guard, Mer!”

“That’s not true. I faced a very strong enemy when I was helping the noble girls who were kidnapped. The world is a big place. If I overestimate my strength, it will be my downfall.”

“What are you trying to do here, anyway?” Kreuz smiled wryly, looking exasperated and a little fatigued as well.

“My dream hasn’t changed from when I was little. One must have a certain amount of preparation when you pick up a sword, right? If you wield a sword without being properly trained or fully prepared, you can put everyone else around you in danger. That’s why I won’t allow it. I think if you want to wield a sword, *you must* be ready.”

I thought I understood that during the incident with the kidnapped girls. A sword must be used to protect those who cannot protect themselves. But I didn’t truly understand it because I’d always

had strong people fighting alongside me. That wasn't the case that day. I only had people who were unable to protect themselves with me.

Even though I had fought together with the army before, they weren't with me then. I was the only one who could protect those girls. What if I hadn't been able to? What if I had fallen? They certainly wouldn't have gotten out of there alive. They might have met an even worse fate since I had rebelled against the kidnappers. And that was why I couldn't lose that day.

I felt a responsibility when I took the sword in my hand. It was my duty to act. And for the first time, I had learned the difficult responsibility of protecting people and how heavy it was.

"I know how strong your resolve is, Mer. But you still shock me sometimes with the things you say."

"I agree. Training's a lot tougher now that you're back," Shrey stood up painfully. "Everyone! This is what happens when you don't train enough! It's gonna be twice as hard now!" He yelled at the guys behind him.

"Noooo!" the men yelled, but Shrey ignored them with a smirk.

"By the way, Kreuz... Who is that with you?" I suddenly noticed a young man standing behind him. He was handsome, with black hair and a muscular frame. I could tell that he'd stand out in a crowd in town, and he was the youngest person here except for me. He was probably around the same age as my brother.

"Ah, that's part of the reason I'm here. I was gonna introduce him to the general."

"It's nice to meet you. My name is Abel. I belong to the first division of the army. Excuse me, but you are...?"

"I'm Mer. I'm serve as the bodyguard for Lady Merellis, the general's daughter. Nice to meet you."

"He just joined the army. He was originally supposed to be doing office work, but an order came from above that this year we'd have at least one apprentice with each group for a limited time. He got assigned to my regiment. Abel still needs lots of training, so he'll be coming here more often from now on."

I had the impression that the army was nothing more than fighting, but there were many people who joined up to do other kinds

of work. For example, every army needed people to do accounting, manage equipment and supplies, and other such tasks. Still, anyone joining the army—even just for a desk job—had to have a certain level of combat training. It was necessary for them to know what the soldiers go through, so that’s why they were assigned to work for each regiment for a limited time while they trained.

“Hm, if he was assigned to your regiment, he must be pretty good.” He wouldn’t have been signed to the lieutenant general’s regiment otherwise. Father and Kreuz wouldn’t have allowed it.

Abel looked a bit shy when I said that, his face turning slightly pink. He waved his hand in front of his face. He had a softness about him, something that would make people feel like he was easy to be friends with. “I’ve got a lot to learn. I certainly can’t be compared to you, Mer, not when you’ve defeated members of the toughest guard in the kingdom!”

“I have a lot to work on too. I’ve hit my limit for training today.” I knew my limits better than anyone else, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to push any further right now. “I think I’ll be coming here to train more regularly from now on, so I’m sure I’ll see you again sometime.”

“Thank you. I’m looking forward to seeing you again.”

“We’re going out to eat. How about it, Mer?” Kreuz said after Abel and I exchanged pleasantries.

“I’m sorry, but I have to excuse myself. Thank you so much for today, everyone.” I turned down Kreuz’s offer and left. I went back to my room, wiped off my sweat, changed, and sat down in bed. My body was already aching with fatigue since I was so unaccustomed to training these days.

“That was good.” Still, I felt fulfilled. I loved to train. I loved the tense feeling I got from moving my body and swinging my sword. I thought I’d never be able to do it again, so I was purely happy.

If anyone ever attacked Louis, I would draw my sword without hesitation. Surely he would have many guards around him, but that didn’t give him absolute protection. Look at what happened to Mother, after all. I knew how painful it was to lose someone precious to you, and I never wanted to experience it again. I never wanted to lose him.

I closed my eyes and fell asleep, thinking that I would train harder tomorrow.

“Father. Whatever happened with your investigation into Rimmel?”

“They’re very well guarded, so I’m having a tough time,” Romello sighed and tossed the documents onto the desk.

Louis picked them up and thumbed through them. “There are two factions, the moderates and the hard-liners, and you’re trying to investigate both of them. You’re trying to make contact right now?”

“Yes. But both factions are cautious, so I’m not making any progress. They must be in the midst of a power struggle.”

Rimmel was the principality north of Tasmeria and east of Tweil. They had relationships with both kingdoms.

“Right now, the hard-liners seem to have the upper hand because they’re expanding their territory. But if they lose, it’ll reduce the threat to this kingdom.”

“That’s right. I’m prioritizing looking for their weakness right now. But we have to be prepared for the worst-case scenario too. If the situation changes, it wouldn’t be surprising if war broke out right away.”

“Like with Tweil? It’s true that their poor harvest was the trigger and that war started very suddenly. Although Rimmel is also north of Tasmeria, they have more fertile land so I think their food supply should be stable. What do you mean when you say, ‘if the situation changes?’”

“I might be overthinking it. Do you know what an effective way is to bring together a kingdom that’s been split in two because of a power struggle?” Romello asked.

Louis hesitated for a moment and then spoke. “Creating a common enemy?”

“Exactly. They haven’t gone public with their struggle yet, and we’ve got a hero here. Again, I might just be overthinking it. Anyway, enough of that for now. How’s the matter of the mercenaries going?”

“It’s not. There’s been no movement at all. The mercenaries which

have gathered in the Anderson march are all still there.”

“I see.”

“Is that why?”

“What?” Romello looked sharply at Louis.

“Is that why you proposed my engagement to Merry? If House Anderson marries House Armelia, it removes them as a target and might dissuade someone from starting a war.”

“She’s your first love, isn’t she? I was just trying to help you out, as your father.”

“I didn’t know you were so kind, Father.”

“Idiot. I *am* kind! That’s why I tease you so much, because I love you!” Romello laughed heartily while Louis sighed and glared at him.

“Fine, fine. You are kind. To your friends, anyway.”

“Ha ha ha! It’s true. Anyway, you know that girl would be fine even if she did get swept up into a war.”

“Don’t joke about that. She *is* strong, but she’s also the kind of person who would rush headlong into battle to protect others first. Her strength is dangerous.”

“You really do love her, don’t you?” Romello mused.

Louis became flustered and blushed, which was unusual for him. Finally, he forced a cough and regained his composure. Romello smirked at the sight.

“So? What did General Gazell say?”

“He doesn’t want to kill him.” Romello heaved a sigh.

Louis raised an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me you agreed with him!”

“I had no choice. He felt very strongly about it. And if I take matters into my own hands, he could turn on me even though I’m on his side.”

“But that’s...”

“I did tell him that if his brother makes a move, I’ll have to act. Don’t overlook even the tiniest bit of information, Louis. Not if you want to protect your bride’s family.”

“That was always my intention.”

“I’m sure. I’ll continue investigating Rimmel. And I’ll protect the kingdom from the sparks of war, Louis.”

“Very well, Father.”

The two of them exchanged glances of very strong resolve for a moment. Louis then excused himself from the room. Once he left, the young man returned to his own room and flopped down in his seat.

“You seem very tired, Lord Louis,” a young attendant said to him with a wry smile.

“Do I? I suppose I have a lot to work on, then.”

“You’re very hard on yourself.” The attendant poured Louis some tea and set it down in front of him.

“I think you’re stricter than I am. On yourself, that is.”

“That’s not true. After all, I certainly have a lot to learn,” he said with amusement.

“Oh? I’m interested why you think that,” replied Louis.

“There’s no big reason why. It’s just... The world is a big place, that’s all.”

Louis looked down for a moment, deep in thought, then sipped his tea before looking back up again. “I see. Very well, then. Would you please leave me alone, Berne?”

“Of course. Excuse me, my lord.”

Louis watched the young man leave, then started reading through the documents on his desk.

Chapter 7:

The Future Duchess Finds Kindred Spirits

I FINISHED WITH MY LESSONS at the Armelia manor for the day and climbed into my carriage. I gazed out at the familiar landscape, waiting to arrive back home. The Anderson mansion was quite close as most of the nobles' houses in the capital were centered around the royal palace. I arrived back at home in no time at all, but once there, I realized there was some kind of commotion in front of the house.

I opened the window. "Stop the carriage," I commanded the driver. The carriage smoothly came to a stop. There were two girls older than me at the gates by the guard. They looked up at the carriage in surprise. "Hello." I called out the window to the guard, and he immediately straightened up.

"Lady Merellis! Welcome home!"

"Thank you. What's all this commotion?"

He froze for a moment, not knowing exactly what to say. "Well, that's..."

"Are you Marquis Anderson's daughter?" One of the young girls asked me, interrupting the guard. When I looked closer at them, I realized they were the exact same height and both had the same face. That surprised me, and I was taken aback for a moment. The guard quickly reached out and tried to silence the girl. Ordinarily, their behavior toward a noble like me would be beyond reproach.

"Yes, I am. What's going on?" I didn't mind such things though, so I responded.

"Please let us see General Gazell!"

"You want to see my father?" I wondered whatever they could want with him. Kreuz had told me that he was widely admired due to his reputation as a hero, and he did have some very passionate fans. But the girls were so worked up about wanting to see him, I had to think there was something more to it. "May I ask why?"

"We're admirers of General Gazell, and we want to join up with the first division of the army! But we heard that the army doesn't allow

women to join... We came here to ask him if there was any way at all that we could anyway!" One of the girls said in a pleading tone. I immediately flashed back to when I had been in the same position.

I had wanted that same thing for myself. I closed my eyes in hesitation. I thought perhaps I was being too soft, but I let out a sigh and opened the carriage door. "Please get in. I don't know when my father will be home today, but you should ask him directly."

"Th-thank you!" They both said in unison, bowing their heads to me. I urged them into the carriage and then had the driver start again. Once we were back at the mansion, I asked a servant to show them inside and had two members of the guard to look over them. Then, I went back to my room.

Moments later, Nana came in. "My lady, I heard that you allowed strangers into the house!"

"I have two guardsmen watching over them to make sure they don't try anything untoward. I'm sure they can handle it. Although I do think it's a needless fear."

The girls were very intense and adamant about seeing Father. Their attitude showed me that they were serious, so I had invited them in.

"That's not what I'm talking about! Why did you do such a thing?"

"Did you think I would say no? After all, I once wanted to join the army, just as they do." I giggled, but Nana's exasperation was clear despite her smile.

"Yes, yes, I know. And I know that once you make up your mind about something, you don't budge!"

"He he he. You know me well, Nana. Now, is Father coming home today?"

"Those girls are lucky because I just received word that he's on his way home now."

"Goodness, they do have all the luck! Now, could you help me change so I can go with him to meet the girls?"

"Of course."

Nana helped me swap outfits and I headed for the parlor. "Oh, Father!" Fortunately, I ran into my father on the way there.

“Don’t ‘Oh, Father’ me! Honestly, what were you thinking?”

“I know, I know. But I came to hear them out too.”

“That’s not what I mean! Do you plan on letting just any random person who wants to have an audience with me into our house from now on?!”

“Of course not.”

“Then why?”

“I just had a hunch,” I answered immediately.

Father froze for a moment. “A h-h-hunch?” he stammered.

“Yes, that’s right. I think you’ll understand when you meet with them. Those girls are incredibly intent on this. Plus, there have been others who have come to see you directly before.”

“Well, yes...but they’re women! You know that I can’t let them join the army.” What was unsaid was the implication in his voice—“*You know better than anyone why I can’t.*” And he was right, of course. But that was why I had invited them. And that was why I knew they were pleading for a way to make their dreams come true.

“Yes. Anyway, I want you to see these young women with your own eyes and listen to their request.”

“Five minutes and that’s all.”

“I think that will be plenty of time.”

We entered the parlor where the girls were waiting. The moment we walked in, they immediately lifted their gazes.

“Are you the girls who wanted to see me?” Father sat down in front of them.

One of the girls leapt to her feet, the other one quickly following suit. “Please forgive our rudeness for coming here so suddenly!”

“Please forgive us!”

“It’s fine. Now sit down and tell me why you’re here,” Father urged, and they obeyed.

“My name is Anna. And this is my younger twin sister...”

“Enarene.”

“We’ve come from a village called Ferrota.”

I'd never heard of that village and glanced over at my father. For a moment, he had a funny, flustered look on his face. It was a subtle expression, and these girls wouldn't have noticed it since this was their first time meeting him.

"As you know, our village was one of the sites of the battle against Tweil. Our father and mother both died in the war."

"I'm very sorry to hear that. So you want to join the army to avenge their deaths?"

"No, not exactly. I wouldn't say we're not still angry and sad about losing our parents, but that's not it. We're extremely grateful to you, General Gazell. Because we would've died if you hadn't come to our village."

"I see. So you were there?"

"Yes. As you know, Tweil had stolen everything, including all the goods and supplies, from the villages they had invaded."

"And they killed all the villagers who defied them. How were the ones who weren't killed supposed to survive when they took everything? On top of that, the Tweil army took over our town and used it as their base..." Anna trailed off for a moment. Enarene patted her back soothingly.

I took her silence as an opportunity to mentally draw up a map of Tasmeria. I thought Ferrota could either be in the former Ceyzan domain or in Monroe's. Either way, once you went to the border territories, villages were quite a distance from each other. If you were surrounded by an invading army, you wouldn't be able to call for backup without outside assistance. The enemy wouldn't allow it. They knew that letting any villager escape would mean they'd tell their enemy where they were.

"We were very young then, and we cried and screamed because our parents were killed... The Tweil soldiers didn't like us crying so much and were going to kill us too, but then General Gazell came to save us."

"We were overwhelmed by General Gazell's strength. We were shocked when he broke through such a hopeless situation and saved us. We were drawn to him. We're so grateful to him for doing that, and we respect him very deeply."

“Ever since then, we’ve wanted to be useful. We want to work under you and protect others as you protected us. That’s why we came here, to ask if you would please let us join your army!”

Ahh, so that’s it. I thought. I remembered something he said before.

“After they touted me as a hero, I felt an intense pressure to live up to that title. I ran after it as fast as I could, but that made a trail behind me. And to my surprise, other people started following me—the citizens.”

People saved by my father followed him. And then other people would follow *them*.

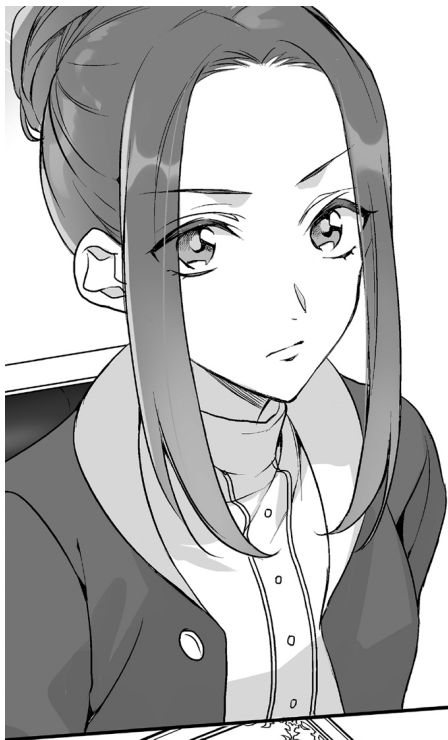
I truly understood what that meant at that moment.

“I’ve heard what you have to say, and I understand. But as you know, only men are allowed to join the army. I don’t have the authority to override that rule. So unfortunately...”

“But *why* aren’t women allowed to join? We can beat any man out there! And...and if women just aren’t allowed, then... We’ll stop being women and live as men!”

“If it was a matter of us not being good enough, we would give up. But this is gender discrimination. That’s why we just can’t give this up!”

Both of them passionately objected to Father’s words. Seeing how desperate they were reminded me of myself not too long ago.



“And have you been training yourselves to be prepared to join the army?” I asked. Father reached out to stop me, but I ignored him and continued. “It’s very admirable to want to protect others. But unless you’ve trained for that purpose, it’s nothing more than a pipe dream.”

The twins looked at me sharply. “Of course we’ve been training. We’ve had to practice on our own, obviously...but we’ve trained.”

“I see. Would you like to work here for a while?”

“What?!” They answered in unison.

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” said Father. “I’ve been looking for an attendant for Merry. And if you work here, then you’ll be able to take part in the guards’ training. I’m sure it’ll take some time before women are allowed to join the army, but until then, you can stay here and train. But if you slack off on it, even a bit, you’ll be asked to leave. Do you agree, Merry?”

“Yes, Father. I have no objections.”

“Well? What do you say?”

“We...!” Anna still didn’t want to back down, but Enarene held out her hand to hold her back.

“Let’s accept, Anna.”

“But Enarene!”

“We have a better chance of our dreams coming true if we work here. It’s rare that members of the army get to train with the general. We should stay here, hone our skills, and continue to petition the kingdom for a change.”

“Hmph. Fine. We’ll stay.”

The guards led the girls to another room.

“Why did you take their side?”

“You know why.” I smiled faintly as my father stood up, and he quickly glanced away. “It was a slip of the tongue.”

“I could say the same thing back to you. Why did you react that way when you heard the name of their village? What connection do you have with it?”

“I was just a bit emotional... That’s the village where I met your mother. Ferrota village, in Ceyzan’s domain.”

“Oh? Wait...” All of a sudden, a possibility jumped into my head. *Impossible!* It defied logic, but I just couldn’t shake the thought. There was no way the daughter of a noble would be allowed to travel to another domain and put herself in danger during a war—and especially not the battlefield itself, even if she *were* nursing the injured.

So then why had my mother been there?

Father sat across from me, where Anna and Enarene had been sitting. “Yes, that’s right. Your mother, Merelda, was the only surviving member of House Ceyzan.”

“But how? I thought every member of House Ceyzan had been killed during the Tweil war!”

“It was a case of mistaken identity. She was mistaken for her younger cousin who had been taking refuge in the Ceyzan manor. Merelda had defied her family to visit that village to tend to the injured soldiers after we freed the village.”

“But what about her cousin’s family?”

“They owned a large part of Ceyzan’s domain, but her parents had died early on in the war. She had no other relatives, so the Ceyzan family took her in and let her live there with them.”

“Excuse me for the wild question, but... What if Mother really *was* that cousin, and the direct line of Ceyzan had died in the war?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, why else wouldn’t Mother have inherited House Ceyzan and carried on the name herself?”

“I saw an unfinished portrait at her home of Count and Countess Ceyzan. Merelda was the spitting image of her father. I can show it to you later if you’d like as it’s still in Merelda’s room. Anyway... I didn’t care if she was the cousin or the heir. I proposed to her not knowing who she was, after all.”

“But then why—”

“Why are you so hung up on this?” Father asked, and suddenly I snapped out of it. He was right—why did it matter now? It didn’t matter who my mother was. She was still my mother.

“To put it simply, it was the royal family’s decision. They wanted the domain rebuilt as soon as possible and to build up its defenses. The

royal family wanted the northern border of the kingdom to be particularly fortified. A woman couldn't have been the governor, of course, so Merelda couldn't do it. I suppose she could have had someone marry into the Ceyzan family, and I tried that, but when I came back to notify the royal family of my intentions, I was told I had to inherit House Anderson. They were vehemently against it. However, I had no intentions of inheriting without Merelda by my side, so I decided to quit the army and marry into her family anyway. For a long time, our negotiations were getting nowhere. The royal family didn't want me to quit the army, House Anderson wanted me to take over that family, and Merelda wanted me to help rebuild the country by strengthening the army's defenses. All I wanted to do was stay with her. We eventually reached a compromise, and this is how it ended up."

I was so shocked that I wasn't sure what to say. "What an amazing story."

"I suppose. Anyway, we've gotten very off topic here. Once I heard those girls were from the former Ceyzan domain, and not only that, but the very village where Merelda and I met, well...I guess I went a little soft."

"I see..."

"Well? Did you hear what you wanted to hear from them?"

I thought about Anna and Enarene again. Their whole situation had nearly slipped my mind because I'd been so shocked hearing the truth about mother.

"Yes, I think so. I'll keep watch over them. I have a feeling they're going to need a lot more training."

"I'm sure you're right. I could tell just by the way they moved when they left the room. You probably noticed it before I even saw them. So then why...?"

"Because I want to see."

"See what?"

"I told you that before we came in the room, right? That I wanted you to see them with your own eyes and listen to what they had to say. Well, we listened to what they had to say, so now I want to see them. I want to see how strong their dream is. And I want to see how strong they can become when they put their will to it."

Father let out an exasperated laugh. "Then why didn't you just say that? I do like those girls. You already decided to invite them to live here before you even introduced them to me, didn't you?"

"Yes. Like I told you, I just had a hunch about them."

"Ha ha ha. You certainly did."

"Well, if you'll excuse me, Father. Thank you for indulging me in this." I stood up and thanked him. He just waved his hand in front of his face as if to tell me not to worry about it. I laughed back and left the room.

I returned to my own quarters and sat down at my desk to read a book. Lady Aurelia had given me a variety of things to read. Lately, I'd been reading books in different languages, history books, and other ones that were popular. When I wasn't having my lessons or training, I was sitting at my desk, reading. I read quietly for a while when suddenly, there was a knock at the door.

"It's me, my lady." Nana came in with Anna and Enarene in tow. Apparently, she had them change, because they were now wearing servant outfits. I stared at them absently for a moment. When they were dressed alike like this, you couldn't tell them apart. I was able to tell the difference earlier because of their different hairstyles and clothing, but now dressed in the same uniform, they were completely identical. I stared at them, trying to figure out if there was a subtle way for me to tell them apart.

They were in their twenties, so they were older than Pax. Both had very distinctive, cool eyes. *Darn it, I can't spot one difference between the two!* I heaved an inward sigh and then said, "My name is Merellis Reiser Anderson. I'm looking forward to having you here."

"Th-thank you for having us!"

"...Thank you."

"I will be the one training you. I'm going to work very hard to make sure you will be useful to your mistress very soon," Nana said as she looked over them and bowed.

"I'm relieved to hear that, Nana. I'm sure it will be rough for you two at first, being unaccustomed to the work. But please, do your best. Starting tomorrow, you will be allowed to participate in Father's training sessions as well. Please tell someone right away if there's

anything you need.”

“Y-yes!”

“...Very well.”

It was interesting that although they had identical faces, their demeanors were completely different.

“We’ll be going now, my lady. I’m sorry to have interrupted your reading. If you’ll excuse us.”

“Of course.”

They left the room, and I looked back down at my book for a while. It was very quiet, and the only sound in my room was me flipping the pages. I was immersed in the story, feeling like I was in the world within its cover.

There was a knock at the door, and I heard Nana’s voice from outside. “Excuse me, my lady. Dinner is ready.”

I looked up from the words on the page and opened the door. “How was their first day?”

“They were quite flustered since they aren’t used to this work.”

“I figured as much. He he. I certainly understand the feeling.”

“Then you shall be a wonderful example for them. I’ll make sure they don’t embarrass themselves, but the more good role models they have, the faster they’ll grow,” Nana said.

“I’ll do my best.”

I went down to the dining room to have dinner, and instead of going back to my room afterward, I went to Mother’s. I opened the door and stepped inside. A strange feeling came over me—it was like she was still living here. The room was kept spotlessly clean, and all of Mother’s things were still out, just as they were when she was alive.

“Mother...” It was like time had frozen inside of this room’s walls, and I felt frozen as well. But after a while, I came back to myself and started looking around. I wanted to see that portrait my father told me about. It was kept securely inside of her desk, like a treasure. The sketch depicted Count and Countess Ceyzan, with my young mother snuggled between them. She had a very happy look on her face.

But...it was also incredibly sad. After all, not long after this happy scene was drawn, war would tear the family apart forever. I had felt

somewhat detached from the Tweil war before, but now I felt very connected to it. I wondered what kind of sadness Mother had kept hidden behind that gentle smile of hers. How much anguish and pain had she gone through? I stared at the sketch, trying to burn it into my memory. I then carefully put it back in the drawer and left the room.

During a break from our lessons, I was telling Lady Aurelia about Anna and Enarene.

“Goodness. It does sound like a good experience for you, though. Becoming an example for another can be very educational. You have to be clear with your actions and words, after all,” she said.

I couldn’t help but let out a dry laugh in response.

She ignored my reaction and smiled. “So be sure to keep up with your studies.”

“O-of course...”

“All right, that’s enough of a break for today. Shall we get started again?” she asked. Then she began playing the piano, and I danced in time to the music with Alf. “Yes. Yes, that’s right. Think about the music. Exactly, and move elegantly!”

I listened to her voice as I concentrated on my feet. If I didn’t, I’d trip over them and fall. I was realizing that it was quite difficult to move in time with music. But if there was one thing I could boast about, however, it was that I had very high stamina due to my training.

“Don’t look down at your feet! Smile! Yes, that’s it. Now, concentrate on the flow!”

I took Lady Aurelia’s advice and smiled. I had a feeling it was a very tense smile.

“Yes, keep that posture. That’s right, good!”

I kept dancing with Alf until the end of the song. “Thank you for today’s lesson.” I thanked Lady Aurelia and then excused myself. I got into my carriage and headed home. Once there, I went to my room and got changed. Then, I went to a place in the house where I could see the training grounds from inside and watched. Anna and Enarene were

somehow managing to keep up with the basic training exercises.

When people went through Father's regimen for the first time, many of them struggled very hard with the basic training and could barely make it through. This meant the girls must've been telling the truth—they *did* have some amount of training. Still, they needed much more because they were already panting and tired. After they were done with those exercises, they continued on to swing their swords with the rest of the guard. It was clear that they were self-taught as they had said, since their technique was quite rough.

"Well, my lady? What do you think about them?"

"Oh, Nana! I didn't know you were here. Are you interested too?" I asked as Nana served me some tea.

"Not particularly. I don't understand much about those things. I was just wondering how they were doing."

"I see. Well, they're doing well with Father's routine. Although at their current skill level, they wouldn't be able to fight with anyone. I'm looking forward to seeing how much they grow though."

"Is that right? By the way, my lady, it seems as though you were already aware of their talents when they got here. Did you know them before they came to the mansion?"

"Of course not. I met them outside the mansion that day, just as I said. Didn't I tell you that, Nana?"

"I didn't hear it directly from you, no. You just said that you had two guards watching them in case they tried anything untoward and that they would be able to take care of them if that happened. Your words seemed like you knew just how strong the girls were even then."

"Oh, that's what you meant? Ha ha ha. No, I just had a hunch, that was all."

Nana blinked at me in surprise. I felt a chuckle welling up inside of me so I forced it down with a sip of tea. "I could tell by the way they carried themselves when they walked and by the way they watched their surroundings. Father always told me to size up my opponent's strength by subtle gestures they made, so I've done so ever since I was young. Perhaps Lady Aurelia's lessons helped as well."

"Lady Aurelia? What does the Duchess of Armelia's lessons have to do with it?"

“It’s hard to control how you naturally move. She’s been giving me a lot of guidance on my own movements. And when I pay close attention to that in myself, I start to notice how other people move too.”

But in the end, it was just a hunch—formed by my opinions based on my own experiences. I trusted those.

“I see. My lady, I just realized something from what you just said.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve seen you grow so much since you began taking lessons with Duchess Armelia. I can tell that you’ve been working very hard too. That’s probably because the training there is excellent. But I think another reason for it is because of the observational skills you’ve gained over the years. You watch things closely, notice differences between people and things, and adopt others’ good habits yourself. I think that’s why you’ve grown into such a proper young lady so quickly.”

“Goodness, Nana. I wasn’t expecting you to compliment my etiquette, but thank you!”

She had a point—even if something didn’t seem important at first glance, it could be related to something later on and be useful.

“Of course! I’m looking forward to seeing you grow even more, my lady!”

“I’ll do my best, Nana.” She smiled softly at my response. “By the way, what should I do for my own training while the two girls are out there?”

Her smile quickly turned into a look of exasperation. She let out a sigh. “Why don’t you introduce yourself as Mer?”

“You’re not going to try to stop me, Nana?”

“Just how long do you think I’ve served you, my lady?”

“He he he. I suppose you’re right. I can introduce myself to them as Mer, but I think that the longer they serve me, they’ll realize very quickly that Mer and I are one and the same.”

“You...were planning on hiding it?” Nana looked surprised.

“I want to say that it wouldn’t hurt to tell them since they’re servants of this house, but at the same time, I don’t want too many people to know.”

There was no reason for me to feel embarrassed about my

training, but it was just unheard of for a young noblewoman. If word spread, it could affect my reputation, so I had to keep it a secret. And when it came to secrets, the fewer people who knew, the better. That was why I had no intention of letting anyone else in the household know.

“I see. So then do you plan on giving up your training?”

“I don’t want to do that. I already took too much time off from it, and my body paid the price. I actually want to train more now.” I mentally went over the schedule of training sessions in my head. Lately, I had been so busy with my daily lessons at the Armelias’ that it was harder to take part in sessions with everyone else.

“No matter what, it will be hard to participate, so I’ll have to train on my own. I can just ask members of the house guard to work with me privately while the girls are here.”

“In that case, I’ll make sure they don’t go near the training grounds while you’re doing that. There are still many things I need to teach them. I’ll be watching over them for a while, so I don’t think they’ll find out your secret right away, at least.”

“I see. Thanks, Nana.”

“Of course.” She smiled softly at me.

“By the way, Nana. Did you think about what I asked you before?” I was talking about her family. Nana was a widow, and she had one child with her late husband. Her child was all grown up now, so once it was decided that I’d be going to the capital, Nana chose to stay with me, and now she lived apart from them.

As one might expect, Nana hadn’t had an extended vacation since we got to the capital, so she hadn’t seen her family in some time. Once I realized that, I had suggested several times for her to go home and visit, but she refused. Then, I told her in that case, why not invite her family to the capital so they can see where she works?

“My lady, thank you so much for your generosity. But it really is fine. I’ve dedicated my life to serving House Anderson, so I’m much happier staying here.”

“Are you sure? You haven’t gone home once since we came to the capital.”

“I know. It’s fine.” She smiled and I could tell that nothing I could

say would change her mind. She was stubborn, just as I was.

“Well, let me know if you change your mind.”

“I will.”

“I think I’ll read some more now. Could you bring a pot of hot tea to my room?”

“Of course, my lady.”

Some time had passed since the twins had come to the mansion. They seemed to be accustomed to it now, and they were slowly getting better at their jobs as my attendants. In fact, Anna had made me some tea right now as I read. I sat and sipped on the tea as I turned the pages.

“This is a bit too hot.”

“What?”

“Tea from Philriden needs to be brewed in hot, but not boiling, water or else it loses its flavor. The water needs to be cooler in order to bring out its true sweetness.” Recently, I had learned how to appreciate and drink tea properly during my lessons at the Armelia manor. One of the jobs of a noble was to know about the finer things in the world. Even our tea breaks in the middle of lessons were educational.

Anyway, I digress. There were many different types of tea, and a lady was supposed to know the perfect method to brew each one. I was in the middle of studying those types of things. Honestly, before I began my lessons, I never had time to sit down and properly enjoy a cup of tea. When I stepped off the training field sweaty and thirsty, I didn’t care what I drank as long as it quenched my thirst. But even then, I knew what tasted good to me and what didn’t though.

“O-oh, y-yes! My apologies, my lady!”

I didn’t know what Anna and Enarene would end up doing in the future, but it was important to me that they had some modicum of etiquette knowledge. I tried to impart as much wisdom as I could to them when I corrected them.

“It’s fine. You’re still learning your duties. Just be more careful next time.” I took my gaze away from my book and looked at her. She

frantically bowed her head several times and then left the room carrying the teapot.

I looked back down at my open book. I read for a while longer, and then I sat up in my chair and stretched. I called Nana to my room.

“You wanted to see me, my lady?”

“I’m going to go train now. I’ll let you know when I get back and am finished changing.”

“Yes, my lady.”

She excused herself from the room, and I changed into my training outfit. I looked myself over in the mirror. I was used to wearing these clothes, but at the same time, seeing my reflection felt strange. I’d had short hair like a boy for so long, but now, my hair had grown out past my shoulders. It would be difficult to train like this, so I tied it back. I grabbed my sword and left the mansion.

I started by running laps around the house. I worked up quite a sweat after just the first one. Once I was done running, I worked on my sword swings. I loved doing this so much. It felt like I could cut away all the nagging thoughts in my mind with each stroke, calming my heart. I emptied my mind and continued my swings like that for some time.

At a little past noon, I returned to my room, changed, and ate lunch. I felt somewhat disappointed because it was clear just how much my reflexes had dulled after taking so much time off from training. But now that I had gotten back to it for a little while, I felt like I was close to being back in shape as I had been. At the very least, I didn’t have to collapse in my room for a while after training. The more I worked at it, the stronger I got.

I finished eating lunch and got ready in front of the mirror. My clothes looked great on me. My hair looked nice and healthy. The reason I was so concerned with my appearance was because Louis was stopping by the house today. He said he had an errand to run in the area.

Even though I visited the Armelia manor every day, I didn’t get to see him very often. However, we did exchange letters regularly. At first, his letters to me were very formal because he had never written a private letter before. Well, neither had I, but Lady Aurelia taught me how to do it. Putting that aside, now that we were going to see each

other again, I was happy...but also a little anxious. I felt so impatient that I kept checking myself in the mirror to try to calm down.

“My lady, Lord Louis is here to see you.” Enarene called for me as I fidgeted in front of my reflection. I froze—I was so embarrassed that someone saw me carrying on like that! I slowly turned to look at her, but she watched me without revealing anything on her face and just waited for me to respond. “I see... Please go ahead and show him to the parlor.”

“Yes, my lady.”

I smoothed down my hair one last time and left my room. I walked quickly down the hallway to the parlor. Anna was waiting in front of the door and opened it for me.

“I’m sorry I kept you waiting, Louis.”

“No, not at all.”

I bowed my head, and he smiled warmly at me, giving me a small wave.

“Anna and Enarene, would you please leave us?”

“But...” They hesitantly glanced back and forth between Louis and myself.

“You don’t have to worry about Louis. Nana will be here soon anyway.”

“Very well...” They very reluctantly nodded.

“Are those the two new girls I’ve heard so much about?” Louis asked as soon as they left the room.

“Yes, that’s right. They’re working very hard, both at training and with their jobs here at the mansion.”

“I see.”

“Hey, Louis? Did you hear about them visiting the palace?”

“I have. I’ve been keeping my ear to the ground about the matter.”

“Does that mean talk hasn’t circulated widely enough yet?”

“Unfortunately, yes. The matter hasn’t reached the top yet, as it were. And to be perfectly frank, most people are treating it like a joke.”

“I see...”

“Even if people *were* to take them seriously, they’d have to completely restructure the army. It’s a very high hurdle to cross.”

“It is. And that’s infuriating.”

“Still, I think they’re serious about it. Otherwise, they wouldn’t keep going to the castle with those petitions.”

“I agree...” Hearing that made me happy, and I smiled at him. If the girls really wanted to join the army, then they had to win that fight on their own. Father had a lot of influence over the army, and Lord Romello had a lot of influence in the palace. If these girls could win the two of them over, it might not be too far-fetched to say that the establishment could change. But they’d have to *make* it change.

It was also highly possible that the girls would face unnecessary backlash. And not just these girls but any girl in the future who had the ambition to join the army. If the twins failed, the door could close for all women, and it was possible that it would never open again. In order to create an opportunity, the girls couldn’t rely on just their own powers. They would need advocates from within the system to help their cause.

“At any rate, I’ll bring it up to the concerned parties.”

“Thank you, Louis.”

“You don’t need to thank me.” He waved his hand, beckoning me to come toward him. I gave him a puzzled look and walked over. He kissed me on the cheek. “I’m sorry, but I have another errand to run,” he said as he stood up.

“Oh...” He had such an apologetic look on his face that I couldn’t bear to stop him. “Will I see you again soon?”

“Of course.” I rushed over to him and threw my arms around him. He didn’t even seem surprised by my behavior—he just laughed and rubbed my back. *How infuriating*. It was like I was the only one who was lonely. But I knew I shouldn’t think such things, because he made time in his busy schedule to come see me. Still, it felt like my love was growing faster than his, and his evergreen composure frustrated me at times.

I wanted *his* heart to race too. I wanted him to be so crazy about me that all he thought about was me. Those greedy thoughts reared their heads in my mind. This time, I was the one to kiss him on the

cheek. I then took a step backward. "If you come here again, I'll show you around."

"I'm looking forward to it."

Gazell had left the capital and gone back to the march alone. He collected some guards from the mansion and then went to go see his younger brother, Wels Orr Anderson. Wels lived in a manor separate from the main Anderson manor, in the northeastern part of the march.

"It's been a long time, Wels."

"Yes, it has, Brother." Wels was even taller than the general, but he was very slender—so much that he looked more like a long, skinny pole. He was very pale, and his skin had a bluish tinge to it, as if he were unwell.

"You look rough. Are you sick?"

"No. I just haven't gotten much sleep lately," Wels answered with a wry smile on his face. He sat down across from Gazell. "By the way, I must offer you a belated congratulations."

"Huh?" Gazell gave him a suspicious look, not understanding what he meant.

"Little Merellis's engagement."

"O-oh, right..."

"I'm quite envious. It must be nice to be able to marry your daughter off so quickly, and to such a high-ranking family," Wels muttered as he sipped his tea.

Gazell stared at Wels for a while, then let out a sigh and took a drink of his own tea.

"So? What brings you here, Brother? It's not often you come out this way."

"Is that right?"

"It is."

Gazell closed his eyes for a moment. There was a heavy mood coming from him. "There's something I want to ask you."

“Oh? What’s that?” The moment those words came out of Wels’s mouth, Gazell’s sword was already at his neck. The general had drawn his sword and swung it with such swiftness that Wels couldn’t have seen it coming. The younger brother’s eyes widened, and he glanced timidly back and forth between the blade and Gazell.

“Wh-wha... What is the meaning of...” He was so flustered, he couldn’t even complete either sentence.

Gazell snorted with laughter. “I don’t like beating around the bush. Answer me, Wels. Why did you attack my family?”

“Huh?”

“Answer me! I have proof tying the attack to mercenaries that *you* hired!” He pressed the blade harder against his younger brother’s neck. A red line appeared on the slender man’s flesh and liquid slowly dripped from it. Gazell’s gaze was sharp, and he had a dangerous aura about him. He looked like he could end this at any moment.

Wels took a breath and smiled. “Could you please put your sword away? Brother?”

Gazell glared at him even more sharply. Wels was no longer frantic and seemed unfazed by Gazell’s actions. Neither man moved a muscle and just continued silently glaring at one another.

Finally, Wels broke the silence. “You want to know why?”

“Is there a problem with that?”

“You’re selfish, Brother. And because of your selfishness, you abandoned your duties as the eldest son. We all thought you ran away from home, and then you came back out of nowhere as a hero with parades in your honor, then you finally took your place again at the head of the family. Have you ever spared one tiny little thought about how I had been jerked around during that time?”

Gazell’s sword trembled slightly. “I...”

“I *hated* you. I had no skills with a sword like you do, so I poured all my efforts into my studies. But all our parents did was fawn over you because you were blessed with combat skills. And when you were thrown out of House Anderson, I was overjoyed, from the very bottom of my heart. I thought people would finally look at *me*. Not my selfish older brother, but *me*, who worked so hard to gain the knowledge to become fit to be governor. I was ready to work myself into the ground

to advance House Anderson. And then the war ended, and the *moment* you came home, *I* was the one thrown out.”

“Wels...”

“What was my even life for, huh?! I wasn’t just a convenient little pawn to have around for you—for the Anderson family! No one spared one thought for me! They just kept manipulating me for their own convenience!”

“And that’s why you had my family attacked?”

“Yes. Actually, I meant for *you* to be the target. But the end result still caused you a great deal of pain, so I was satisfied.”

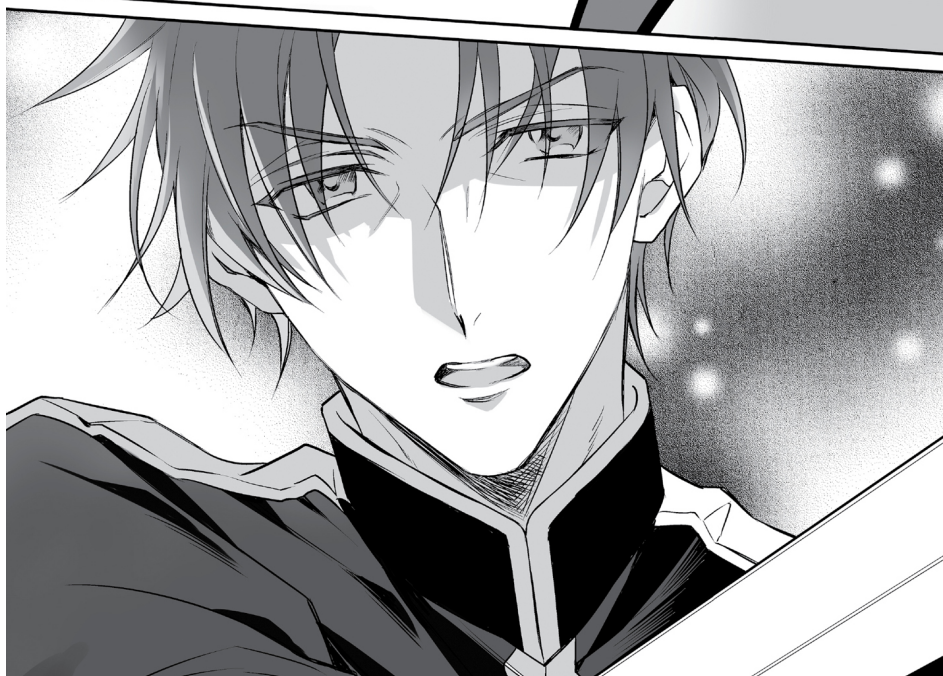
Gazell had let up on his sword slightly, but now he pressed it against his brother’s neck again. “Why? Why did they attack my family and not me?!” He bit his lip, trying to suppress something deep inside of him.

“Because no one was skilled enough to kill you, Brother. You’re a formidable swordsman, after all. I thought I was making a concession, but I was thrilled when I saw just how much pain you were in,” Wels answered coldly.

Gazell couldn’t handle it anymore. His sword trembled in his grip. Wels didn’t move and simply stared at Gazell, as if quietly awaiting his fate. A breeze made by the sword’s movements tickled against Wels’s neck, but Gazell didn’t bring the sword down all the way.

“The moment I found out about what you had done, you knew it would be all over for you. Why would you confess?” The sword was frozen in his hand as he questioned Wels further.

“I don’t even know myself,” the younger brother answered with a dry laugh. “If my plan hadn’t succeeded, that would’ve been a pity. But perhaps I’m satisfied because I got to tell you how I feel.”



Gazell's gaze was still sharp, but he pulled the sword away slightly.

Wels calmly watched him.

"You're going to be arrested. And don't think you'll ever see the light of day again."

At that moment, the Anderson House guards who had been waiting outside the room charged in and arrested Wels.

"That's awfully soft of you, Brother." Wels said calmly with a quiet smile.

The guards pulled him to his feet and walked him over to the door.

Meanwhile, Gazell looked frozen to the spot. He called his younger brother's name without even looking at him. "Wels. I won't apologize. Even if my mistakes were the cause of why you're so twisted, you took away someone precious to me."

Wels shrugged, as if to say, *Too late for that.*

"But I loved you. As my brother."

"You really are too soft, Brother."

Wels was still smiling when the guards took him away.

Later that day, Father called me into his study. I thought it must've been something very important because he had Brother come home from the academy too.

"You're both here."

Father looked so haggard that I was speechless when I saw him. I hadn't seen him like this since the day Mother died.

"Sit down." He gestured toward the chairs across from him. My brother and I both took a seat. "Today, Wels Orr Anderson was arrested and placed under indefinite house arrest."

House arrest was, of course, being confined to one's residence and not being allowed to leave. And indefinite house arrest was an

incredibly strict punishment that meant that the person in question would not be allowed to leave their residence for the rest of their life.

“Our uncle, you mean? But why?” My brother was just as bewildered as I was. Even more unusually, he was showing it on his face.

“Because he had Merelda killed, and he ordered for you two to be attacked as well.”

Brother and I were speechless for a moment. “But why... Why would Uncle do such a thing?!”

“Because he couldn’t forgive me. I’m sorry. You got dragged into my past mistakes.” A self-deprecating smile cracked into his face, making my heart ache. That was how heavily the weight of having his beloved wife being killed by his own brother weighed upon him.

I couldn’t even imagine such a thing, but I did know what it was like to lose someone you loved. All three of us had experienced that. And whether it was a love between a husband and wife or a mother and child, all of us had lost someone precious and irreplaceable. The grief was the same.

But I could not imagine how Father felt having had someone he never wanted to lose be taken away from him by someone else important to him. I didn’t even *want* to imagine something as horrible as Louis dying at my brother’s hands.

That was why I couldn’t say a word. I had very few memories of my uncle, so it was quite easy for me to feel rage and hatred toward him. Honestly, I thought that permanent house arrest was too soft a punishment for him, and it felt unbearable to me. But when I thought about how Father must feel—I just couldn’t say anything about it. After all, I didn’t want to do what I had done before. I didn’t want to put my own feelings first at the expense of my family and hurt their feelings again.

A heavy feeling fell over the room. None of us spoke. Each time someone opened their mouth to speak, they thought better of it and closed it again. I wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but finally Father broke the silence.

“That’s all I have to say.”

My brother and I trembled in our seats. There were so many

things I wanted to ask, so many things I wanted to say. But my own thoughts and hesitations made the words die in my throat. I stood up without having said anything, and my brother did the same. We both left the room after that, and we walked silently down the hallway to nowhere in particular. Before I had gotten to my father's study, I was thinking about the long list of things I had to do today, but the shock of it all had made my mind a complete blank.

"Want to take a break with me?" my brother asked me with a weak smile. I quietly nodded, and we went into the parlor together.

Once inside the room, we both sat down. A servant prepared some tea for us and then set our cups down on the table. I slowly lifted my cup and sipped. It felt like the warmth eased my nerves.

"You've changed so much."

"Thank you. It's because of Lady Aurelia's wonderful lessons."

"That's not what I mean. When we were listening to Father, I expected you to blow up like you used to."

"I'm not a child anymore, Brother. I can tell how Father's feeling right now."

"Ah... I suppose you're right." He let out a dry laugh and then set down his cup. "Then maybe I'm the one who hasn't grown up enough."

"Do you hate Uncle?"

"I don't know. Wait... Honestly, yes, I do. But for some reason, I just feel like yelling out."

"I felt that way too."

"Did you ever meet our uncle, Merellis?"

"No. There weren't any opportunities after you left for the academy either."

"I see. So you don't know much about him then."

"Honestly, no. I remember his name, that's about it."

"Hmm..."

"Do you have many memories of him?"

"Fuzzy ones. But the impression I had of him when I was little was that he was kind and gentle. He always had a sort of wry smile on his face. He didn't seem like he was a typical member of the Anderson

family, at least.”

Once Father took over the family, my brother said we very rarely saw our other relatives. There were many people who tried to take advantage of my father’s reputation as a hero and use it to their benefit, and Father did not like that at all. But the overarching reason was because they had tried to interfere in his marriage with Mother.

Since all I had done when I was younger was train, I certainly was in no condition to see my relatives. It made sense that I didn’t remember much about my uncle. Although he was a member of my family, he was a complete stranger to me.

“That’s how badly he wanted to be the head of House Anderson, huh? Or maybe that’s just how much he hated Father.” My brother continued slowly. “Either way, it’s over.”

“What is?” I gave him a puzzled look.

“The fight to avenge Mother. It’s really over now. And I didn’t even get to fight in it.”

“No. It’s not over.”

Now it was my brother’s turn to look puzzled.

I continued. “I still have a wish that no one will have to go through what we went through. And until that happens, it’s not over.”

He smiled. It was a very happy, proud smile. “That’s true. You win that argument. You’re really looking toward the future now, aren’t you?”

“Am I? I feel the same way you do though. I can’t say that I don’t hate Uncle.”

“I have a feeling this pain will last for a lifetime.”

“I think you’re probably right... But we’re different, Brother. You won’t get held prisoner by your hatred like I would. You got this far by facing forward. It gave you sustenance.”

“It doesn’t look like you’re being held prisoner by hatred right now.”

“Because I have someone who lets me be free of it now. After we lost Mother, all I had was the hatred. Toward the bandits who killed Mother, the weak citizens who had needed Father’s help that day... I kept cursing this irrational world. But now, I have something warmer in

my heart that's greater than hatred. Before, I couldn't let go of that hatred, but I can forgive the world now, thanks to a certain person."

I wouldn't say I could forgive my uncle. I wasn't that good of a person. Mother meant too much to me. In fact, now that I knew it was Uncle who had taken her from me, and once I saw how haggard Father had looked today, I had cursed the world again for a moment.

But most of all, the fact that Mother had been killed by someone related to me bothered me so much. I thought about how evil people could be and how you shouldn't trust anyone.

But...

I knew that there was more to the world than hatred and cruelty. There were warm feelings that could bring you closer to others. And that was why I wasn't taken prisoner by hatred today. Rage had formed my existence and its roots reached deep into my heart. But that wasn't all there was.

My brother narrowed his eyes and grinned happily—so much so that it looked like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "Thank you, Merry. I feel a lot better now."

"I'm glad. I feel a little calmer now that we've talked too," I said with a smile. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

I went back to my room and picked the day's book back up. It seemed there was no end to educating oneself. There was so much about the world I didn't know yet, and every time I learned one thing, it led to so many more discoveries. Each time I came across something new, I pondered this new knowledge and made it my own. Learning was genuinely fun.

But right now, I was reading because it was a part of my new routine, and it calmed my heart.

"Excuse me, my lady." I heard Nana's voice as she knocked at my door. She came in and lit the lamps in my room. I was so absorbed in my book I hadn't even realized that the sun went down.

"I didn't realize it was so late." I put my book down and stretched, my bones cracking. "Could you make me some tea, Nana?"

"Yes, of course." Nana quickly made me some and served me a cup.

"Mm, your tea is the best." I let out a sigh when I tasted the

familiar flavor.

Suddenly, Nana stumbled and fell.

“Are you all right, Nana?!”

“Y-yes, I’m fine. I’m sorry to worry y—ow, ow!” She tried to stand up, but her face twisted with pain.

“You’re not fine at all. Someone!” I rang a bell, and Anna came into the room. “Call a guard. Nana fell and she’s injured.”

“Yes, my lady. Shall I call a doctor as well?”

“Yes, yes, that’s a good idea. Do that.”

“I’m so sorry, my lady...” Nana apologized.

“You don’t need to apologize, Nana. You just worry about yourself right now.”

A few moments later a guard came and carried Nana out of the room.

“The doctor says she’s broken her leg. She’ll have to rest for a while.”

“I see. I’ll tell everyone that they will need to work together to cover her tasks. And I should let Father know. Will you tell Nana to take care of herself?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Ahh, I’m so worried. Even if you tell Nana to rest, she just doesn’t know the meaning of the word...”

Anna smiled wryly and nodded. “We shall take over her duties. Although, I think this will cause the most trouble for you, Lady Merellis...”

“It’s no trouble at all... Though Nana does help me a lot.” Nana had been by my side ever since I was small, and she was like family to me. We had gotten even closer since Mother’s death. “At any rate, I need to tell my father first. Anna, do you know where he is?”

“He’s in his study right now.”

“I see. I need to straighten up a few things in here and then I’ll go to him. Will you tell him to expect me?”

“Yes, my lady.”

After Anna left, I returned to my desk. I took some deep breaths, suppressing the urge to run to Nana. If I went to her now, she would be worried about me. I didn't want her to force herself to get up before she had fully recovered. *Everything will be all right. It's just a broken bone, and it'll heal with time*, I told myself. I was startled at how shaken I was and tried to calm myself down. Once I regained my composure, I went to Father's study.

Some time had passed, but Nana just didn't seem to be getting better. I knew that a broken bone could take a while to heal, but I was worried sick about her.

"Nana, how are you feeling?" Under normal circumstances, I never went to the servants' quarters, but I just had to see her. Her eyes widened when she saw me, but then a warm smile spread across her face.

"I might be fully healed tomorrow now that you've come to see me, my lady." She had said it with a smile, but there was a dark shadow in her eyes.

"Nana..." I called her name and clasped her wrinkled, warm hand. Her hands had always protected and guided me. She put her other hand on top of mine and looked down at them.

"You sure have gotten big..." she murmured, caressing my hand slowly. "You were such a tomboy, but so kind. You always cared about a lowly servant like me. Such an innocent little girl. It's been such an honor to see you grow up. The joy of my life."

"Nana, stop talking like this is the last time we'll see each other."

"I'm sorry. I'm just being a little sentimental, I suppose." She flashed me a mischievous smile, which was unlike her. "But my lady...it is goodbye, for a while. Since I am useless to you here, I shall go back to the march and recover quietly there."

You're not useless—please don't say that... Stay here.

I wanted to say those words, but they got stuck in my throat. When I thought about it more carefully, that was the most natural thing for her to do, wasn't it? If a servant was sick or injured, they returned to

the march to recover. She wasn't sick, but perhaps it would be better for her to go home and be taken care of by her family. Plus, she hadn't been home since we got to the capital, so this would be a good opportunity for her to finally see her loved ones.

"Do you promise to come back?" I asked, despite all that. I knew I probably sounded like a selfish child, but Nana still smiled tenderly at me.

"Yes, yes. Of course. Wherever you are is my home, after all."

"Then make a full recovery and come back to me."

"I will, my lady." She answered without hesitation. I breathed a sigh, then sat back in my chair by her side.

"When will you go home?"

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?! That's awfully sudden!"

"I'm fine except for this broken leg. The master has prepared a special carriage for me so I can lie down and be comfortable on the journey."

"I see. That's a relief."

"Once I've made a full recovery, I'll come back."

"Okay, Nana. I'll be waiting."

The next day, Nana got into her special carriage and returned to the march.

Anna was going to her mistress's room to wake her up, as she did every day. Merellis usually woke early and would be up by the time she arrived at her room. As expected, she was already getting ready for her day when Anna arrived.

"Good morning, Lady Merellis."

"Morning, Anna."

Although it was first thing in the morning, Merellis answered clearly and promptly. Anna absently thought how pretty her mistress

was, despite not even having a bit of makeup on right now.

“I’m sorry I kept you waiting. Please let me help you finish getting ready, my lady.” Anna helped Merellis finish dressing, and then they both headed to the dining room. Anna walked behind her, watching her closely. To be honest, Anna didn’t care much for her mistress. She was a rare beauty who seemed to have all the world’s happiness shining down upon her. She was oblivious to pain or sadness and lived in an entirely different world than Anna did. That had been her first impression of her mistress, and it had only been further cemented in her mind as she continued working for her.

But at the same time, questions hung in her mind. Why had Merellis welcomed them into her household? And why had she questioned her and her sister? Was she testing them?

“And have you been training to prepare for joining the army?”

She could still hear her mistress’s question echoing in her ears.

“It’s very admirable to want to protect others. But unless you’ve trained for that purpose, it’s nothing more than a pipe dream.”

Every time she remembered that, Anna’s chest burned with anger. Merellis lived a happy, blessed life and didn’t know a thing. Her father was a hero, so perhaps she had the mistaken idea that *she* was one too.

Of course, Anna didn’t dare let her opinion of her mistress show on her face. As Enarene had said, the Anderson manor was the perfect place to grow stronger. The members of the guard were so strong that the girls *had* to admit their faults to get better. The training here was incredibly difficult. She couldn’t let these fleeting feelings—the irritation she had toward her mistress who had welcomed her here—get in the way.

“Oh, you’re leaving today? Are you ready?”

“Yes. Anna and Enarene helped me prepare. Right, Anna?” Merellis asked, snapping Anna back to reality as she stood waiting in the corner of the dining room.

She stood up straighter. Her idol, General Gazell, and her mistress, Merellis, were sitting at the table, staring at her.

“Ah, y-yes. All the necessary preparations have been made.”

Merellis smiled and nodded, then turned to her father. “So I’ll be heading out today. Lady Aurelia said it will be good for me to get to

know more people, and perhaps this'll be a good opportunity for me to clear my head."

"I agree. I've gone to Rubel with the army, but I didn't know it was such a popular summer retreat."

"It is. I think it would be good for me to see such a place. It's also a chance to meet more people."

"I see. Well, enjoy yourself."

"I will. Thank you, Father." Merellis finished eating and stood up, then excused herself from the dining room. Anna followed behind her. After that, she and Enarene carried Merellis's bags out to the waiting carriage. They were heading to Rubel, an area to the north of the capital that was a favorite summer getaway for nobles.

Merellis got into the carriage, and it slowly started to move.

Enarene, who was sitting across from her mistress, suddenly spoke up. "Lady Merellis."

"Yes, Enarene?"

"I know it might be a bit late to ask, but I was wondering if we shouldn't have more guards?"

Anna inwardly agreed with Enarene. They were only bringing two members of the House guard with them. That was way too few for a noble, especially one from a house as important as House Anderson.

"Two is enough."

"But what if..."

"There's no need to worry."

Merellis's confident attitude reignited the irritation Anna had inside of her from this morning.

"But how can you be so sure?" Enarene continued her interrogation. Anna wondered if Enarene was also irritated, because her voice carried a hint of annoyance.

"Why..." Merellis gave them a perplexed smile. "Well, I just think it will be fine, that's all. Two guards are plenty strong enough to protect us."

"All right..." Merellis was right in that the Anderson guards were the strongest in the kingdom. The two young women knew that very

well, so they didn't question her any further.

They continued riding in the carriage, occasionally stopping at towns along the way. Three days later, they finally arrived in Rubel. It was no wonder this was a beloved spot by the nobles. Even though it was far from the capital, the roads here were well maintained, and the city was beautiful.

Once Merellis arrived at the inn, she didn't show even a hint of fatigue from the journey and went out to explore the town right away. Enarene and the guards accompanied her while Anna stayed behind to unpack. She let out a sigh as she carried out her task.

This truly was a completely different world from one she'd ever experienced. Even this inn was fully equipped with everything one could ever want. She had a hard time believing this was really her reality.

But when she closed her eyes...she could still see the horrors of war.

Perhaps that was why it felt so strange for her to be here.

She quietly finished her tasks and then sat down in a chair, absently letting her mind wander to calm herself down.

Just then, Merellis walked into the room. "Anna, thank you for unpacking. We just got back!"

"P-pardon me for my rudeness, I wasn't expecting you back so soon..." Anna trailed off, and her gaze went toward the window. She had started unpacking in the morning, and now the sun was already in the western sky.

"Time certainly flies, doesn't it? I'm starving. I'll eat here at the inn. Why don't you girls go have your lunch break too?"

As expected with such a fancy inn, it was famous for its gourmet menu and impeccable service.

"Of course... If you'll excuse us, then."

After Anna finished helping Merellis get ready, she, Enarene, and the guards went out to eat in town.

Five days later, Anna was out sightseeing with Merellis. Her mistress didn't ever seem to want to relax or take it easy—she was always busy as a bee, no matter what she was doing. She enjoyed not

only exploring the town but also the surrounding forest. Anna couldn't believe it had already been five days since they had arrived.

"That was so fun. I'd love to go again sometime," Merellis said with a contented smile on her face.

And now they were on their way home. "That was a nice place, wasn't it?" Anna replied.

Merellis's eyes sparkled. "It was. The city was beautiful, but most of all, every single thing I ate was delicious! The fresh fish was especially good." She and Anna chatted about the trip while Enarene gazed out the window. They were taking a different route home, at Merellis's suggestion. She said since they were traveling, they might as well make the most of it and see as much as they could.

The road they took there was often used as a thoroughfare for Rubel and the capital so it was well traveled, but the same couldn't be said for this one. The twins didn't notice much difference between the scenery besides the fact that this road was much more deserted than the previous route.

Enarene continued staring out the window—it wasn't clear whether she was just absently gazing out at the scenery or if she was on guard. She didn't show her emotions much on her face, so it was hard to tell.

"Were you girls drawn to anything in Rubel?" Merellis asked.

Enarene turned away from the window and exchanged a glance with Anna.

"When we were walking through the forest, it reminded me a lot of where we grew up, so I felt very nostalgic," Anna answered. Enarene nodded in agreement.

"Oh? Did you girls stay in your hometown the whole time until you came to my house?"

"No, our grandmother on our father's side took us in, so we lived in a village far away from our hometown. We spent the majority of our time training, so I can't remember much else about it."

"Did your grandmother support your dreams?"

"No. She stopped us from training many times."

"Oh, my. So then how did you convince her to let you leave? Or

did you run away without telling her?”

“She passed away. She had been sick for several years beforehand, so we were prepared for it.”

“I see... I’m very sorry to hear that.”

“It’s all right. We’re grateful to her. She didn’t have to take us in, but she did. And we had everything we needed there.”

“And you didn’t see yourselves staying in that village?” The girls’ gazes became absolutely icy at the question. “Don’t get the wrong idea—I’m not making fun of your dreams. I’m just curious. I was wondering if you ever considered a different path after having a peaceful life in the village with your grandmother.”

“...No,” Enarene replied flatly. “Even though a long time has passed, I can still see the horrors of war. I can still hear the screams in my ears. I think those scenes will follow us around for the rest of our lives. We can’t turn back time, but at least we can try to prevent that from ever happening again. That’s why we’ve vowed to become stronger.”

“I see...” Merellis’s gaze turned out the window. She furrowed her brow, lost in thought.

The girls sat in silence as the carriage continued, then stopped at a town. They quickly arrived at their inn, where Anna made some tea for Merellis. “It’s delicious. You’ve gotten much better at this, Anna.”

“I’m honored to hear that.”

All of a sudden, they heard a noisy commotion, unbecoming of the quiet village.

“Did you hear that? I wonder what that is?”

“Enarene and I will go look. Please stay here with the guards, Lady Merellis.”

“All right.”

With their mistress’s permission, the twins dashed out of the inn. Outside was chaos, a far cry from the peaceful atmosphere it had been when they went inside.

“What in the world is going on?!” Anna grabbed someone and asked.

“R-run away! Bandits! They’re coming from that way!” The man

yelled frantically. He shook off Anna's grasp and started running again.

"Bandits? I thought things were peaceful now that we are in a ceasefire agreement...but apparently there are still scoundrels like these around."

"The nearest army garrison is quite far from this village. And this isn't exactly a major strategic point, so it's hard to believe the kingdom would rush to action."

"Why in the world did Lady Merellis choose this route?!" Anna was completely annoyed that her mistress would purposefully choose to go off the beaten path, regardless of how much she wanted to see the sights.

"There's no time to be upset about that. We have to make sure Lady Merellis is protected."

"True." Anna agreed with Enarene and started running. But for some reason, Enarene didn't follow. Anna turned and yelled, "Enarene!"

"I can't just abandon these people who are in need of help! They're just like us!"

"You know I feel the same way!"

"I know, but we work for House Anderson now. We can't let anything happen to Lady Merellis. You need to go to her." Enarene said, but Anna wouldn't budge. "Now!"

"Fine, but I'll be right back!"

Anna hesitated for a moment. She glanced down the road she needed to take and then started running. She made her way through the crowd of townspeople who were frantically trying to run away, and back toward the inn.

"Lady Merellis!" Once inside, she threw the door open, not even bothering to knock.

"Well? What's going on?" Merellis was completely calm, in sharp contrast to Anna's demeanor. However, she was dressed differently from before. She had been wearing a dress made out of fine fabric, but now she wore men's clothes that were easier to move in. Her hair was tied back, and she wore a sword at her hip.

"L-Lady Merellis, why are you dressed like that...?"

"That's not important. What's going on?" Merellis's gaze

sharpened, and Anna faltered for a moment. Her mistress's tone was completely different than usual. Merellis normally spoke with a soft, elegant voice, but now it was tense and short.

"Y-yes, er, apparently bandits have come."

"I see. Let's go, Anna," Merellis said breezily, in such a casual tone one would think she'd just said, "I'm off to the Armelia manor!"

Anna was positively confounded. "G-go where?!"

"Outside, of course."

"Oh! We're going to run! Of course! I'll get the carriage ready!"

"We don't need the carriage. Can you ride a horse?"

"Y-yes..."

Merellis strode off, and Anna scurried behind her. The two guards followed.

"Then come with me. We're going to where Enarene is."

"Wh—but we can't! Please run away! Please forgive my rudeness, but you'll only be in the way since you can't fight!"

"There are citizens trembling with fear as we speak. And my attendant Enarene is in the middle of them. I have to go."

"But...!"

"Plus, who said I can't fight?"

"What?"

"If you want to help Enarene, stop the needless chatter and come with me." It was a sharp order.

Anna was speechless. All she could do was follow behind Merellis. They reached the stables, and her mistress quickly got a horse ready, as if she'd done it a million times. Anna watched in stunned silence for a moment, but she couldn't be left behind, so she got a horse ready too.

Merellis mounted her horse and was off so quickly that Anna and the guards could barely keep up with her. Anna spotted three silhouettes on horseback in the distance. One was aiming a sword at a person slumped down on the ground. Merellis spurred her horse on even faster. *How fast can you go?!* Anna wanted to scream, frantically following after her.

Merellis drew her sword, and it cut through the air toward the

man on horseback.

“What...”

The young woman quickly cut down all three men, one by one. She wielded her sword with an expert hand, with no wasted movements. Anna was mesmerized. Merellis was so beautiful as she fought that it almost looked as if she were dancing. But at the same time, she was mercilessly killing the men without hesitation, like a grim reaper.

By the time Anna and the guards finally caught up with her, the attacking men were already dead.

“Are you all right?” Merellis asked the person on the ground, who appeared to be a villager.

“Y-y-yes...” Her voice trembled as she looked up at Merellis and nodded.

“Good. You’ll attract too much attention here. Hurry and get inside the house.”

“O-okay.” The woman nodded, and Merellis urged her horse to run again. “Thank you... Thank you...!” The woman cried as she realized she was finally safe and thanked Merellis over and over again. She must’ve heard her, because the young mistress turned around and smiled at the woman. Then, she turned back around and continued charging forward on her horse.

“W-wait!” Anna cried, but Merellis kept going. Every time she came across a villager who was being attacked, she killed the bandits and saved the innocent. All Anna and the guards could do was follow after her.

“Enarene isn’t here...”

They’d circled around the entire village, but they still hadn’t found Enarene. Merellis stopped her horse at the edge of town and scanned their surroundings, trying to get a grasp on the situation. The only sounds were of villagers crying and screaming. Some people were frozen, with their family members clinging on to them. Others were searching for people who had gotten lost in the chaos. Some were heading toward the forest, calling out names over and over again.

“I’m so glad you’re safe!” As Anna was standing quietly to the side so as not to be in Merellis’s way, a man came up to her.

“Have we met...?”

“You went into the forest, right? To save the children who were kidnapped by the bandits!”

“Which way did the bandits go?” Merellis overheard and asked sharply.

“Th-that way...” Anna wasn’t sure if the man was startled at having Merellis speak to him so suddenly or if he was scared of her intimidating aura. At any rate, he answered her.

“I’m going after them.”

“It’s too dangerous! We don’t know how many there are!” a guard protested.

“It’ll take too much time to send word to the nearest garrison. Plus, it’ll be useless unless we can tell them where the bandits are. And if they’re inside a building, it’ll be easier that way.”

“But...”

“Enough! The guard is right though, Anna. You should stay here.”

“No... If you insist upon going, then I shall go with you, Lady Merellis.”

“That wasn’t a request. It was an order.”

“But...!”

The two of them glared at each other for a moment. A cold, heavy weight filled the air between them. Finally, it was Merellis who relented. “I don’t want to waste time here. You’ll have to protect yourself. Let’s go.”

Her horse was already galloping toward the forest. And once again, the guards and Anna were left chasing after her. No one said a word. The horses grunted as they made their way, rustling the leaves and grass as they made a path through the wild brush in the moonlight.

Suddenly, Merellis stopped. “Here. This is where the tracks stop,” she murmured as she got off her horse. She turned and gestured to the others. There was a single building nearby, here in the middle of the forest, and there was laughter coming from inside.

Merellis soundlessly walked through the grass. She spotted Enarene and snuck up next to her. “Shhh.”

Enarene lifted her arm to strike, but then she realized it was her mistress and froze. “Lady Merellis?! What are you doing here?!”

“I’m here to save the children who were kidnapped, just like you are. The bandits are inside, right?”

“Y-yes, but...!”

“Guards, I want you to split up. One of you go with Enarene to the back entrance and charge inside. I want you to prioritize rescuing the kidnapped children. Kill any enemy who stands in your way, *without hesitation*.”

“What? Y-yes, my lady.”

Merellis ignored Enarene’s confusion and gave out the next order. “The other guard will come with me and Anna as we break down the front door.”

“Y-yes, my lady.”

“Do you remember the sounds of the villagers screaming?” Merellis asked quietly as the tension between them all reached its peak. Bewildered, all of them but Enarene nodded. “Right now, they’re trembling in fear, praying that those who were kidnapped will be safe. They’re waiting back at the village for the girls to come back home. And they’re crying for people who will never come home again. We cannot allow these bandits to take anything else away from them.”

Anna and the guards trembled at the icy malice in Merellis’s voice. Even Enarene, who still looked confused by Merellis’s sudden transformation, was affected by it.

“I want you all to follow your orders and come back to me alive.”

“Yes, my lady!” they all answered in unison.

Now it was time for them to split up. One of the guards left and went with Enarene to the back of the building.

“May I...ask you something?” said Anna.

“What?”

Anna was intimidated by Merellis’s sharp gaze but continued anyway. “Why did you react instantly when I said the word ‘bandits’?”

Perhaps now was not the time nor place to ask such a thing, but Anna wanted to know. Ever since Merellis came across the first bandit in town, the anger she was exuding seemed to grow greater and greater.

And the glare she had fixed on the building was colder than ice and incredibly frightening.

Merellis's eyes widened slightly with surprise. "Because bandits killed my mother," she answered in a quiet voice.

"What...?" Anna was shocked. She had thought Merellis was a sheltered noble girl who was showered with happiness. Suddenly, it all made sense now. The sharp malice which made others tremble, her frightening skill with a sword. If her mother had been killed by bandits, what had this young woman been through since then? Anna couldn't help but wonder.

"You can ask me more questions later, but right now, we need to go." Merellis's firm voice pulled Anna back to reality. Her mistress silently approached the building and took out the two bandits serving as lookouts with incredible speed. The moment their bodies began to fall, the Anderson guardsman ran over and caught them, quietly lowering them to the ground.

Merellis then opened the front door. She struck down every enemy who stood in her path as she walked down the hallway before they even knew what was happening. All Anna and the guard could do was watch in stunned silence as she worked. Before long, no one was left alive in the hallway. It was deathly silent...but then they heard amused laughter coming from a room in the back.

Of course, none of the bandits inside that room would have ever guessed that such a thing was happening right outside their door. Merellis opened the door and slew the nearest bandit before the others could even ask what she was doing there. The laughter vanished, and the room became as silent as the hallway from which she had just come.

Merellis killed the enemies one by one before they could even grasp the situation. By the time they realized she was killing their comrades, she'd already done away with a third of the bandits in the room.

What's happening? Who is that? The bandits' faces were frozen with fear, and one could almost hear the questions going through their heads in rapid fire.

"Th-there's only one of her! Everyone, attack!"

Someone screamed fearfully and began to attack Merellis. It set off a chain reaction, and everyone charged at her at once. The numbers

weren't on her side, and the guard and Anna were finally about to enter the fray, but Merellis stunned her enemies by continuing to lay waste to everyone who attacked her.

"A-argghh! Someone help meee!" one of them screamed as Merellis stopped in front of them. The rest of the bandits thought that was the perfect opportunity to gang up on her.

"And what did you all do when the villagers pleaded for you to help *them*?" she asked, marvelously dodging all their attacks. "You're fools to beg for help. You know what you can do? Burn in hell as you plead for someone to help you!" Sheer malice dripped from every word she said. Cold sweat dripped from the bandits' faces as she continued. "I don't know what led you to pick this path, but you chose it. You decided to hold a sword and use it to steal things. And in that case, you must've been prepared to die by the sword too. Am I wrong?" Her voice was beautiful and clear as a bell. It only made her words sound even more menacing.

One after another, the bandits turned their backs and began to run. "Get out of the way!" They pointed their swords at Anna and the guard who stood in their paths. They were coming straight for them. Meanwhile, the ones who didn't flee began to attack Merellis again. It was less of an attack and more that they were trying to get the frightful woman away from them—it was their last-ditch effort.

Even as Anna and the guard faced off with the enemy, their attention naturally shifted toward Merellis. She continued her attacks with the same exquisite, sharp swordsmanship they had seen before. Terrifying malice as cold as ice still oozed from her.

They were so struck by her skills that they couldn't even think straight. And until this point, all they had done was chase behind her, watching her back as they followed.

It wasn't until that moment when they watched her move around the room that they noticed the look on her face. It was twisted with rage and sadness, like she would burst into tears at any moment. It made a sharp contrast to the confident, sure strokes of her sword.

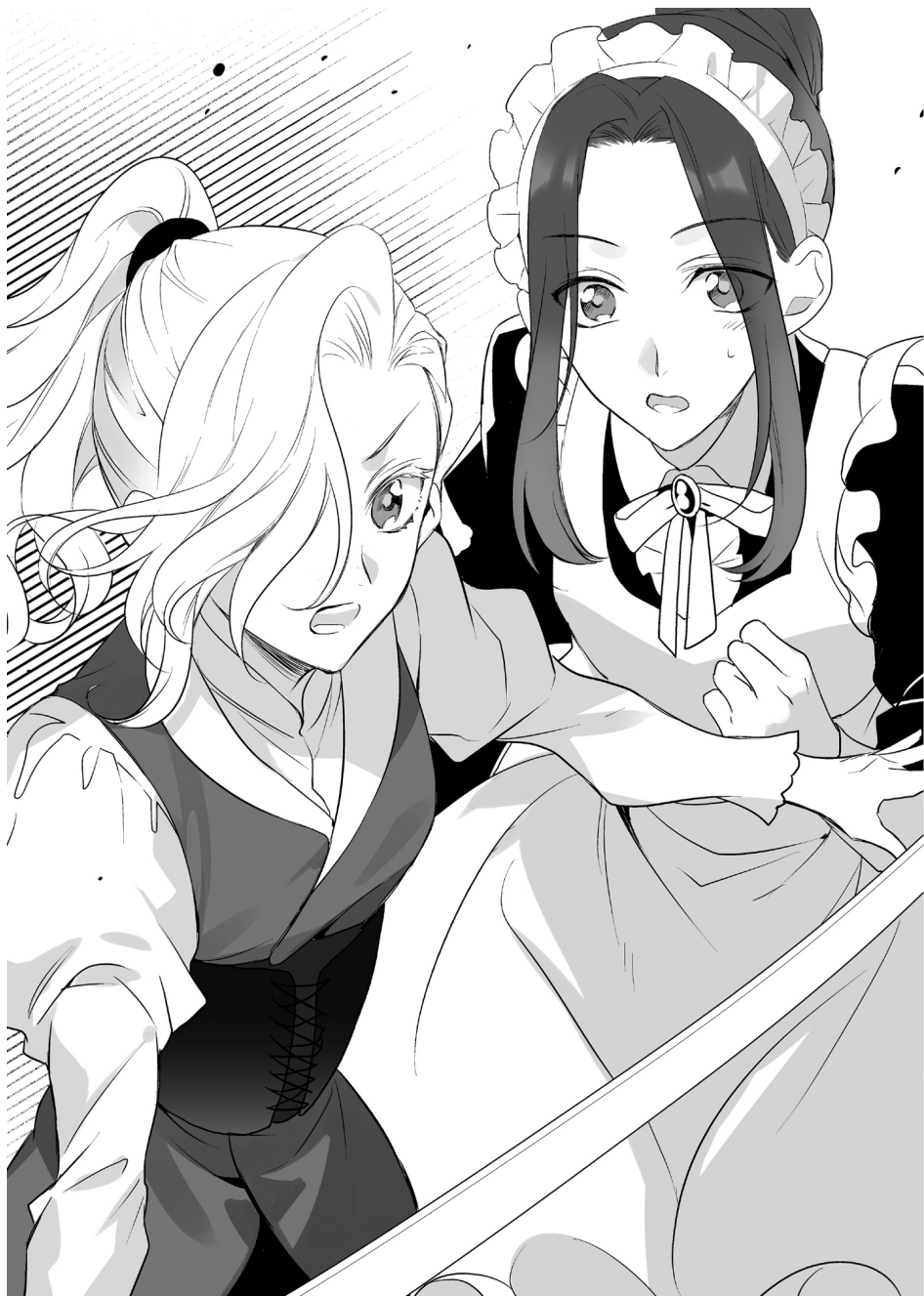
It was like they could almost hear her praying, *screaming*, "I won't let them take anything else away. I won't allow it!"

That cold, frightening malice was just armor covering her sadness. Before long, Merellis had killed every last bandit in the room. She

had been greatly outnumbered, but it hadn't deterred her at all. However, she showed no signs of happiness or relief. She simply turned on her heel and walked over to Anna and the guard.

“Anna! Watch out!” she screamed suddenly.

Anna glanced down to see a man wielding a sword—a man who had previously been lying face down on the floor after he and Anna had fought. “Huh?” She didn't understand and stood there stunned for a moment. She hesitated, even though this was a matter of life and death. The sword swung down toward her. She saw it as if it were in slow motion...but the blade never reached her.



Merellis had dashed between them with dizzying speed and parried the sword in Anna's place. She regained her stance and kicked the man away, putting distance between them. The young mistress then killed him.

Anna's brain finally started working again when Merellis addressed her. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"I-I'm okay. I'm sorry!"

"I don't blame you. This is your first time seeing real combat, right? I apologize for asking so much of you," she said, once again beginning to walk out of the room. She calmly opened every door to check and make sure no one else was there. She continued fighting until every last bandit in the building was dead.

"This is the last one," Merellis murmured as she opened up the final door. Inside were the kidnapped villagers, Enarene, and the other guard. The bandits who had been guarding the room were lying on the floor.

"Lady Mer—" Enarene started to yell, but Merellis placed a finger over her lips and shook her head. Enarene fell silent and nodded. The girls who had been kidnapped were rightfully suspicious of Merellis at first, but once she told them she had killed the bandits and would take them back to the village, they began to cry with happiness.

The group led the girls away from the bandits' hideout.

I'd planned this trip to get to know places outside the capital. Certainly no one would have expected that I'd end up fighting a group of bandits. At any rate, I defeated them. The following day, I sent one of the guards to the closest garrison to notify them of what happened, and we decided to stay at the inn.

I asked the villagers if there was anything else I could do to help, but they all refused, saying I had done more than enough. I had no other choice but to relax in the inn. Apparently, some bandits had even rushed into the building right after I left yesterday and made a mess of the place. Several items from our bags had been stolen, but more importantly, my heart ached because an employee I met yesterday had

been killed. And if I was sad, I couldn't imagine how the rest of the people at the inn felt.

I tried to push away those horrible feelings as I sipped the tea Anna prepared for me. She and Enarene had been stealing glances at me all day.

I couldn't take it anymore. "Is there something you want to ask me?"

"Um, Lady Merellis..."

"Why are you so strong, Lady Merellis?" Enarene interrupted her sister Anna. Enarene hadn't seen me fight, but I suppose she had heard about it from the other girl.

"Didn't Anna tell you? When I was very young, my mother was killed by bandits. I began training with the House Anderson guard in order to avenge her death. However, my father was the one who ended up killing the bandits who murdered her..."

"That's not what I mean! I mean, how can you be so strong when you're a noblewoman!" Anna shouted impatiently. She looked like she was at her wit's end. But then she suddenly came back to herself and froze. "Forgive me, my lady. It's just...I was so shocked seeing how you fought."

"It's all right. But unfortunately, my only answer to your question is what I said before."

"I can't help but ask, though. You're a woman, just like us... How did you grow to be so strong?"

Anna and Enarene's gazes were sharp as knives. The air was heavy and tense between us. I let out a sigh. "I trained with the House Anderson guard and the army. I sparred with them. And I trained on my own from sunrise to sunset, every single day. That's all I did."

"Why did you do all that?" Anna asked, still not accepting my answer.

"I told you why. To get revenge. The only reason I lived on was so I could kill the bandits who stole my mother away from me and send them to hell."

"Did you stop training once General Gazell killed them?"

"No. I continued training, with the goal of joining the army so

that no one else would ever have to experience what I went through.”

The two of them gasped in surprise.

“The reason I welcomed you into my home was because you reminded me of myself back then. I empathize with you to a painful degree.”

“Forgive me for being rude, Lady Merellis, but...” Anna spoke hesitantly. “Have you given up on that dream?”

“Anna!” Enarene chastised her sister’s tone.

“It’s fine. I haven’t given it up. To me, joining the army was just a means of making my dream come true, not the dream itself.”

“What is your dream, then?”

“That no one will have to experience the pain of having someone they love stolen away from them as I had. Perhaps I can’t save everyone from that fate, but at the very least, I can save the people around me—the people in this kingdom. I realized that I didn’t have to join the army to accomplish this—there was another way for me. I thought all I had was my sword and the skills I worked so hard to hone, but I realized that as my father’s daughter—as the fiancée of House Armelia’s son—I would also have the power to help more people.”

I made the decision to kill the bandits and save the villagers and I didn’t regret it. Even if they had a reason for doing what they did, it was still just a stopgap measure in the grand scheme of things. That was why I chose to use my strength to stop them.

If bandits appeared and I chased them off, they might come back, then I’d have to chase them off again. It would only be a vicious cycle doomed to repeat itself unless I stopped the bandits at the source. Regular old Merellis could only kill them with her sword, but Merellis Reiser Anderson was different. If I could make the right connections, I could figure out a way to stop the bandits once and for all.

“But I’m genuinely supporting you two,” I said, wrapping up my thoughts. Neither Anna nor Enarene could reply. They just looked off into the distance as if trying to sort through their thoughts. I watched them as I sipped my tea, but my own mind was preoccupied with something else entirely. “The guardsmen should be back with the soldiers soon,” I murmured, glancing out the window.

Suddenly, I remembered something. “Enarene, I have a favor to

ask you.”

She snapped back to reality and immediately stood up straighter.

“I want you to change into this dress and pretend to be Merellis.” She stared at me blankly for a few moments, her head cocked to the side as if to say, “What in the world are you talking about?”

“I fought right in front of the villagers yesterday. A noblewoman cannot be seen with a sword in her hand.”

“What does that have to do with me pretending to be you, my lady?”

“Up until now, I’ve been attending training sessions at House Anderson as Mer, Merellis’s bodyguard and body double. The person who fought yesterday has to have been Mer. Lady Merellis, on the other hand, escaped the inn and took refuge outside the village. That’s our story. There are some soldiers here who know Mer, so it’ll work. This will be better than anyone finding out the daughter of Marquis Anderson held a sword in her hand!” I had to admit that I was being overly optimistic about this plan working, but it was better than doing nothing. “So, I want you to pretend to be Merellis. Don’t worry, all you have to do is hide your face with your fan. We’ll say you’re too frightened from what happened yesterday and you don’t want to see anyone. It’ll be fine.”

“It doesn’t sound like it’ll be ‘fine’ at all.”

“It’s better than not trying anything. Now hurry up and change!” I immediately took off my fancy clothes and put on the ones I wore the day before. Enarene was visibly bewildered as she put on my dress, and then I had her get into the carriage. Since there was nothing left for me to do in the village, I planned to say goodbye to everyone and leave as soon as the soldiers got here.

They had perfect timing and arrived the minute we were finished getting ready, with my guards in tow. The Anderson guardsmen looked surprised when they saw me but quickly understood the situation. After all, they’d seen me train as Mer, so they had put two and two together the day before and realized that Mer and Merellis were one and the same.

“Hm? Mer?” I heard one of the soldiers say. I recognized him.

“It’s nice to see you again.” I bowed my head.

The man standing at the front of the soldiers gave him a questioning look. "That's Mer. She's General Gazell's daughter's bodyguard. She's trained under him since she was very young and is quite skilled with a sword. I wondered how so few people were able to defeat so many bandits, but now it all makes sense. It's because she was here," the soldier I knew explained to his leader.

"Ah, I see. So she's that strong?"

"Yes. Everyone who trains with General Gazell recognizes her skills. That's why they allowed his daughter to travel with so few guards."

"Hello. As he said, I am Mer. Thank you so much for coming."

"I'm sorry you all went through so much trouble, Miss. Thank you for protecting this village."

"Of course. It's my job to guard my mistress."

"It's very admirable how dedicated you are. I'm sorry to put you out, but could you show us to the bandits' hideout? And can you explain in detail what happened?"

"Ah... Mer, I can do that," one of my guardsmen started, but I shook my head.

"You wait at the carriage," I said. "My mistress wants to go home as soon as possible, but she's worried that you all must be tired from your long journey here. Would you mind riding in the carriage with us?"

"No, I couldn't possibly—"

"My mistress is quite shaken from yesterday's events. Anna's been by her side the whole time, but she's still very anxious, so I think she should remain in the carriage."

"...If you say so."

"You can ask Anna for more details. She's inside the carriage as well. And could you tell her I'm taking the soldiers to the hideout? Let's go, everyone."

And so I showed the group to the building in the forest and explained what happened. They asked surprisingly few questions when I was done and let me leave right away. I went back to the carriage and told the girls inside that I was done and that we'd be going home. Lady

Merellis—Enarene—nodded through the dusty window.

“Please excuse me.”

Thankfully, none of the soldiers said they wanted to say hello to Merellis or ask her for details about the ordeal. Although Enarene went to so much trouble disguising herself, I felt a little bad that she never got to fully play her part, but perhaps that was for the best. I was just about to grab my horse’s reins when suddenly...

“W-wait!”

Someone called out to stop us, and I turned around to see the woman I’d saved yesterday. It had been dark and I was on horseback so I hadn’t seen her face clearly, but I could tell now that she was very beautiful.

“My name is Brittany. Thank you so much for saving me yesterday. If it wasn’t for you, who knows what would’ve happened to me...”

“I’m glad I could be of help.”

“Please allow me to thank you properly.”

“Your words are enough.”

“But...” The woman’s eyes darted back and forth. “You’re leaving today, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I’ll just be in the way if I stay here. The soldiers have arrived now, so there’s nothing to fear.”

“I see...” She had a disappointed look on her face, but I was the one who felt more guilty.

“Please don’t worry about it. Honestly, if my mistress hadn’t chosen to come through this village, I never would’ve been here. As her bodyguard, it’s my job to protect her and get rid of any danger around her. This time, we just happened to have a common enemy. Really, don’t worry about it.”

“Still, you *did* save us. And that’s the truth,” Brittany said with a soft smile. Then she frowned, as if a thought just popped into her head. “Oh! In that case, are you planning on going to the capital?” Her smile returned as she took out a piece of paper and began writing something on it.

“Huh?” I asked, confused.

She handed me the piece of paper with her address on it.
“Actually, I belong to an opera company... If you find yourself in the capital, I can get you tickets to a show.”

Oh, an opera singer? No wonder she's so beautiful. “Ah, I see. Were you just traveling through this town?”

“No, I grew up here. I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I hadn't been home for quite some time. I took a little vacation and came here to visit my family.”

“I see...”

“Thanks to you, I'm alive and can continue singing. I really can't thank you enough.”

“Well, if you insist... I'll accept this. I can't wait to hear you sing.”

“Thank you!”

After we bid goodbye to the soldiers, we left the village behind us. Two days later, we all arrived safely back at the Anderson mansion without incident. Any small troubles along the way would certainly pale in comparison to being attacked by bandits, anyway.

After I explained what had happened to Father, though, he let out a dry chuckle for some reason.

The following day, I attended the day's training session as Mer. Now that Anna and Enarene both knew my identity, there was no reason to hide it anymore. They, along with the two guards who discovered my true identity, were sworn to secrecy.

“Anna, your feet aren't planted into the ground. Anyone would be able to topple you over easily.”

“Yes! I'm sorry!”

In exchange for keeping my secret, they asked me to give them some personal instruction in between exercises. I genuinely meant it when I said that I supported their dreams, so I agreed and now we were sparring together.

“One more time, please!” Enarene stepped in front of Anna with her sword drawn. Her challenging gaze made the match that much more enjoyable. I could feel myself smiling. She swung her sword and made her move. *Yes, that's good.*

She sliced the air with her blade without hesitation, ready to take

her opponent's life. The way she handled her weapon had changed since had real battle experience now. She wasn't fighting to subdue—she was fighting to kill. It was much easier to fight to kill another than to try and capture them alive, at least as long as you weren't underpowered or greatly outnumbered.

If you stepped into battle and hesitated, you'd be putting your own life, the lives of your comrades, and those you were supposed to protect in danger.

That must've been why she chose to fight this way. Enarene had made up her mind. She had the resolve now to strike down her opponent and the resolve to be struck down in return. I parried her sword's strike, feeling her strong feelings and determination.

"That was nice," I remarked. Enarene didn't let her guard down, even after my compliment. "However, you attack the same way every time. The enemy will figure it out quickly. Like this."

I moved in tune to Enarene's motions and knocked the sword from her hand. It flew through the air, and I lunged toward her, pointing the tip of my sword at her face.

"You win," she conceded.

I withdrew my sword. "That's enough for today. Try to think of how you can improve the faults in your movements."

Kreuz approached me, chuckling. "You look like you're having a great time, Mer."

"You look like you're having an even better time."

"Just rubbed off on me after watching you," he said in a voice that sounded like he might break out into song at any moment. "Is training them really that fun?"

I couldn't deny the fact that I was thoroughly enjoying working with the girls. "It is. It's been so long since I felt truly challenged by someone."

"Hey, now, Mer, that makes it sound like you were just playing around with us!"

"No, I don't think so. I know that you were serious with me when it came to training."

"And they come at you like they're gonna kill you?" Kreuz asked,

tossing a stern gaze over at the girls. It was as if to say he wouldn't go easy on them if I said yes.

"I can't say that. Hmm, how should I explain it? Maybe it's because they see me as their rival? I can feel them just burning with a desire to not lose. They know that they're not as strong as me, but they're still frantically clawing for a way to knock my feet out from under me. They take in every lesson I give them and have it down by the next time I see them. They're hungry for victory, and they're serious. That makes me fight more seriously too."

Kreuz let out a chuckle and then sighed. "You're about the only person who would enjoy something like that. But that just means you'll never let down your guard with them!"

"As if I ever would, Kreuz. I wouldn't go easy regardless of what I sensed from them."

That just made him laugh even harder. "You got me, Mer."

Suddenly, a man appeared behind Kreuz. *What was his name again...?* "Oh, Abel."

"I think your attitude toward training is amazing, Mer. Would you consider training me as well?"

"Thank you for your kind words. Unfortunately, I don't think it would be appropriate for me to train you, but if you were to want to spar here, that would be another story."

It was important to draw boundaries with people. I had given guidance many times during these sessions, but I only did it to be helpful. Asking me to formally train someone other than the two girls made me feel hesitant—especially when that person was a commander. I didn't feel right about getting mud on his face, that was for sure.

"I can spar. Let's go," Abel said, drawing his sword.

As he did that, Kreuz, Anna, and Enarene backed away to give us space.

I closed my eyes and released a deep breath, letting all the sounds around me float away. I reached a place of intense focus before opening my eyes. At last, I gripped my sword. "Ready."

The moment I said that, Abel appeared right in front of me and swung his own. He was fast. I parried and leaped backward.

"I'd expect nothing less from you, Mer," he said, lunging at me with another attack. His reaction was delayed by a second, but he was still able to parry my own stroke. The match grew more intense, more dangerous. I focused on his movements and those of my sword.

At the same time, I felt my heart singing in excitement. How would he come at me next? How should I respond?

As our match continued, sometimes I'd get a strange feeling about his movements. Nevertheless, I thoroughly enjoyed the match, but it was over all too soon. Before long, my sword caught his and flung it into the air.

"...You win." He threw both his hands up and declared his loss.

"Thank you." I sheathed my sword and bowed my head to him.

"I expected nothing less from you, Mer. I couldn't even get one solid hit on you."

"You're being too humble. I was on edge the entire time."

"Can we spar together again sometime?"

"Yes, of course. I'd love to."

We smiled at each other. I thought about the strange feeling I got while we were fighting. It was like he was tracing the arc of a form he hadn't gotten used to yet. And that split-second delayed reaction...?

I had a feeling he hadn't completely shown his true skills, but to be fair, neither had I. I always held back while I sparred here, because I knew I could destroy my opponent otherwise. For that very reason, it had been a long time since I enjoyed a match so much. Even if he was holding back as well, I knew he was a worthy opponent.

"Then how about now?" he asked casually as he picked up his sword again.

"Of course." I answered with a smile.

And so we continued sparring. It's true what they say, you know, that time flies when you're having fun. We had several more matches, and then it was time for training to conclude.

"You're really something, Abel. There aren't many people who can hold their own against Mer." A group of soldiers gathered around him once we were finished.

"Not at all... She just brings out the best in my technique. Also,

we weren't having a serious fight, we were just sparring. I wouldn't be standing here if she stopped holding back," Abel answered them with a wry smile.

"Yeah, Mer's scary when she gets serious!"

As I listened to their conversation, I thought about how polite Abel was.

Just then, Anna and Enarene came over to me. "Nice job, Mer."

"You two as well. I'm going back to the mansion, but you can stay here and continue training if you want. I'll tell the mistress."

"...Very well, then."

"No, I'll go back to the mansion too."

Enarene stayed behind while Anna returned to the mansion with me. Once we were in my room, I wiped off my sweat, and she helped me change. Just then, a servant knocked at the door.

"My lady, Lord Louis is here to see you."

"Louis? I didn't know he was coming... Did he send a message?"

"No, he just said he was dropping by. What shall I tell him?"

"I'll be right there," I said and then looked in the mirror. Satisfied, I brushed my hair once more and then left the room. It felt a little strange to do so, even though he had met me as Mer plenty of times.

I opened the door, but Louis was already there. "Sorry to come so suddenly."

"It's okay. I'm happy to see you." I hugged him, then looked up at his face from within his arms. "What's going on?"

"I heard that you were attacked by bandits while you were traveling."

"Oh, that," I laughed. It made my heart warm to know that he'd been worried about me. "I'm just fine, as you can see."

"I know. I just wanted to confirm it with my own eyes or else I wouldn't have been satisfied."

"Thank you, Louis." I buried my head into his chest and tightened my grip around him. I was so glad that he had been concerned about me. But at the same time, I felt I needed to tell him something important. "If something like that happens again, I might choose to pick

up my sword... And every time I do so, I'll worry you. Do you still want to stay by my side, knowing all that?"

"Yes. I accept everything about you, remember?" he said, his voice warm and kind.

"Thank you, Louis." I giggled sheepishly in his arms. I was no match for him.

"There are five influential noble families in Rimmel. Those are the houses of Duke Philling, Duke Grindel, Duke Sligar, Duke Baskar, and Duke Crowe. They're the ones who really hold the power in the kingdom," Romello said, as if sorting through the information out loud.

He and Louis were in his study, surrounded by books. Even though he hadn't meant to speak loudly, his voice echoed through the room.

"Right now, we're attempting to make contact with Dukes Philling and Grindel from the moderate faction, correct?" Louis asked.

"Yes, that's right. Little by little, we're trying to formally propose an alliance between our two kingdoms."

"What are the advantages for Rimmel?"

"First, they'd be released from the threat of General Gazell. Plus, there'd be a reduction of tariffs. According to our research, Rimmel's land isn't suitable for livestock, so they're desperate for a reduction of tariffs in that regard."

"I see. They'd benefit in both ways then. What about for our kingdom?"

"The biggest advantage would be a non-aggression treaty. We have military power, of course, but we don't have enough supplies to fight a war right now. We're desperate for security. And, in matters of trade, they're famous for their production of gold and gemstones, and that would please the nobles."

"All right... So our real goal here is the non-aggression treaty. Let's get the nobles and merchants on board by explaining the financial merits of the arrangement. After that, it should be easy for us to get the

kingdom to agree.” Louis proposed, and Romello nodded. “What about Duke Crowe? He’s part of the neutral faction.”

“According to our information, he hasn’t joined either side because his house fears General Gazell. I think it’s because his domain borders both Tweil and Tasmeria. He hasn’t been in contact with the hard-liners, so I think that Duke Grindel might be able to help get him on our side.”

“That makes sense. If he’s afraid of General Gazell, then a non-aggression treaty would be attractive to him.”

“Exactly. Things are going well with him so far because of that.”

“So the only ones left are the hard-liners Dukes Sligar and Baskar?” Louis asked. Romello heaved a heavy sigh.

“Those two families really have their guards up. We’re tentatively trying to make contact with them now.”

“That’s good news. I heard that Duke Sligar knows Duke Baskar’s weakness, so the latter is beholden to him.”

Romello pounced on that bit of information. “And how do you know that?”

“It just came in from the spy we sent to Rimmel. They caught a glimpse of some ledgers and noticed the flow of money looked quite odd. When they investigated further, they found a letter and a separate dummy ledger. I think word should have reached the palace by now.”

“And what’s this you said of a weakness?”

“Apparently Duke Baskar was in dire financial straits, to the point of being on the verge of bankruptcy. He was over his head in debt, so... he turned to human trafficking.”

“Human trafficking?!”

“Yes. He captured people from his own domain and sold them to other kingdoms. Of course, that’s a serious crime in Rimmel. Duke Sligar got hold of that information and has been holding it over his head ever since.”

“Really?! You have proof, of course?”

“Yes. The spy is bringing it back home. You can ask for more details at the palace.”

“Right. I’ll head there right away.” Romello stood up and rushed

to leave for the palace, which was unusual for him.

Just as he left, Lady Aurelia came in the room. “Hm? Did Romello leave?”

“Mother, are you sure you should be up right now?”

“I’m fine. I can’t stay in bed forever. Merellis will be here tomorrow anyway,” she answered with a sheepish smile.

“I see.” Louis nodded but still urged his mother to sit. “I don’t think Father will be home for a while.”

“I figured. Once he goes to the palace, he usually doesn’t come back for two or three days.” She had a warm smile on her face. “Are you going there too?”

“Yes, when I get the chance.”

“I see...” She let out a sigh. “May I say something, Louis? Before, you said that Merellis was aware that you had vowed to devote all of yourself to the kingdom and its citizens and that you were already prepared for it. Still, I think she’ll be quite lonely from time to time... Make sure that you care for her, and only her, very much.” She had a serious look on her face.

“What’s gotten into you, Mother?”

“I was just doing some thinking, and I’m sure she’ll feel how I feel. I wanted to make sure you knew that.”

“I have no intentions of looking at anyone else but her. She’s my beloved fiancée. We’re both dedicated to staying by each other’s sides.”

“I see... Never go back on those words. She’s my very precious daughter too.”

“Yes, of course.”

“I’m sorry I kept you, Louis. I’m sure you’d like to leave now.”

“I will once I call someone to help you.”

“I’m fine. I walked all the way here.”

“Did you? Well, then, I’ll be going now,” Louis said and then left the room.

Chapter 8: The Future Duchess's Social Debut

“**Y**OU PASS, Merellis.”

The days and months flew by, and I would begin attending the academy in less than a year. I had learned everything necessary for attending school, yet I still continued my lessons as usual.

But one day, Lady Aurelia announced that to me.

“What do you mean, Lady Aurelia?” I asked with confusion.

“I was talking about the results of your lessons, of course.” She laughed with amusement. I’d never seen her laugh like that before. “You’re the perfect lady now. You can go absolutely anywhere without fear of embarrassing yourself. You’ve worked so very hard to get to this point.” Her smile was warm and kind, and I felt myself smiling too.

“Thank you so much, Lady Aurelia.”

“There’s no need to thank me. You’re my future daughter, after all. Anyway, it’s because of all of *your* hard work. I really can’t emphasize enough just how much effort you’ve put into this.”

“It’s because I had your guidance, Lady Aurelia. And I had Louis’s support too.”

“You two certainly are close,” she giggled. “How are things going, with you preparing to go off to the academy?”

“I’m done, actually.”

“Are you! Well, in that case, we should start planning your debut into society.”

“My debut?” To be honest, my heart felt a little heavy. One must be between the ages of twelve and eighteen to make their social debut, and the exact age was up to each family’s discretion. Most people made their debut when they were fourteen or fifteen.

“If we start now, we can pull it off right before you enter school. I’ll go ahead and call the seamstress so we can start designing your dress.”

“What? Right now?”

It sounded like I would be preparing for the debut at the Armelia manor. Since my family was full of men, I was very grateful that I had Lady Aurelia's guidance.

"Yes, that's right." She clapped her hands, and before I knew it, Alf had brought a woman into the room. "This is Madame Crejours. She's the seamstress I use for all of my dresses."

The woman bowed her head to us.

"Now, Madame. Will you take her measurements, please?" Madame Crejours came over and started measuring me. She worked quickly, and it took much less time than I expected.

"Lady Aurelia, do you have any requests for the dress?"

"Hmm... What color do you think would suit her best?"

"It's difficult to say. She's very pale, so I think she would look wonderful in any color. However, since it's her debut, I think a pale color would bring out her youthfulness." She took out several fabric samples and held them each up against my skin in turn.

"Goodness, they all look lovely. Do you have a favorite color, Merellis?" Lady Aurelia asked, and honestly, I wasn't sure how to answer that. There were so many options in front of me that it was hard to decide.

"Madame, what's that?" Suddenly a piece of fabric that she hadn't tried on me caught my eye, and I pointed to it.

"Oh, that one hasn't been dyed yet. I accidentally brought it."

It was pure white. I ran my hands over the silky fabric. "I like this one."

"This one?" Madame Crejours looked a bit confused, but she held it up to me.

"In that case, why don't we have a thin strip of blue fabric across her waist? Yes, tied right here against the fabric..." Lady Aurelia suggested. Madame Crejours arranged the samples to try out the combination. "Oh, how lovely!"

Even Madame Crejours seemed convinced now. "In that case, Lady Aurelia, how about I embroider the hems with silver thread? And I can embellish it with diamonds."

"That sounds wonderful. And with a white sash... Yes, just like

that!”

Lady Aurelia and Madame Crejours continued to talk through this at length and designed my dress together.

“I’ll go ahead and start making it now. I’m looking forward to it!” Madame looked very pleased once it was decided and left with a smile on her face.

Meanwhile, I was so overwhelmed by the intense discussion between the two ladies that I felt a little exhausted. I took a seat—although with proper posture.

“I’m sorry, Merellis. It’s just...I’ve always wanted to pick out a dress with my daughter. I just got carried away,” she said with a sheepish chuckle.

“It’s all right. Thanks to your guidance, I won’t have to worry at all about my debut. Thank you so much.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that. Now we just need to choose some accessories for you. We can do that once your dress is further along.”

“All right.”

“He he he. This is so fun! I can’t wait for my adorable daughter—and my hardworking pupil—to debut!” Her eyes softened with happiness as she smiled at me.

“I don’t deserve such praise, Lady Aurelia.” I felt a warmth in my heart because she really did treat me as if I were her own daughter. I thought of my mother. I’m sure if she were still alive, she would be just as happy about my debut as Lady Aurelia was. I was sure of it.

Lady Aurelia’s smile deepened, as if she were reading my mind.

Once I returned home, I changed into my practice clothes and went to the training grounds to join the exercises. And, of course, I was giving guidance to Anna and Enarene, as promised.

Just as I was finished with Anna and Enarene, Abel appeared.

“Would you like to spar, Mer?” His warm, friendly smile didn’t show any trace of the sharp coldness that was common among those

who wielded a sword. He seemed more like a good-natured older brother.

He was well liked by the men here and had apparently even built a good relationship with the twins, although I thought they didn't have many occasions to interact.

"Of course." I laughed internally, thinking that I couldn't let his demeanor fool me—I truly had to be on my guard when I sparred with him. I knew that he was probably twice—no, maybe even three times—as powerful as he truly let on.

I stood across from him and readied my sword. He did the same without saying a word. His soft aura vanished, and his gaze grew sharp. Neither of us moved for a while; we just studied each other.

Suddenly, I heard the slight sound of his foot moving. My body sprang into action, and so did his. Our swords clashed together. This was so much fun that I felt myself smiling. Looking beyond our crossed swords, he had the same reaction on his face. I didn't hold that position for long; instead, I withdrew, along with my sword. We studied each other once again, scanning for cracks in each other's defenses.

It probably wasn't very entertaining for anyone else to watch us fight. It wasn't a flashy match, but we weren't unevenly matched either. The moment he moved, I would counter, and he would do the same for me. We fought several matches like that, and in the final one, he withdrew because he saw he was at a disadvantage.

"That's enough for today." After several bouts, Kreuz came over and stopped us. "It's time to go. Start cleaning up."

Abel and I laughed, and we bowed to each other.

"Thank you, Mer."

"Thank you, Abel."

We both left the sparring ring and towed ourselves off.

"How long will you be with the first regiment? You're only here for a short time, right?"

"Oh, actually... My apprenticeship period ended a long time ago. I probably shouldn't be coming here to train anymore, but..." He scratched his cheek as he grinned. "Everyone said that since I worked so hard to get better, I should keep training so I don't lose my edge. Because I have my own duties to attend to, I can't come too often, but I

try to participate whenever I can. I'm honored they think so highly of me here," he said with a laugh.

When I talked to him like this, he really did seem like a good-natured older brother. It was a far cry from how he was when we were sparring. I laughed to myself.

"Anyone can take part in these exercises, but it means a lot that they've recognized your talents. But isn't it tough balancing this and your job? You must be so busy."

"Not at all. Once I'm finished being stationed with one regiment, I'm fairly free until I receive my next assignment."

"Oh, I see. The army seems quite different depending on what part you belong to."

"Yes, that's about right."

I looked around and saw that everyone was getting ready to go home. Just a few people remained, and the air felt even cooler as the heat of battle wore off. I folded up the towel I used to wipe my sweat and turned my gaze toward Abel again.

"Well, let me know when you're back, and we can train together some more."

"Yes, of course. I'll have to work even harder to make sure I can keep up with you."

"There you go again, being humble. Well, if you'll excuse me."

"Of course. See you next time."

I left Abel behind and went back to the mansion with Anna and Enarene.

I changed into my new dress that Lady Aurelia had helped design. The dress was cut as low as possible while still being tasteful, and the fabric hugged my body closely down to my hips. On the bottom, the skirt flared out and revealed layers of light blue fabric. Madame Crejours had visited many times to revise the design again and again until it was perfect.

I was wearing a bracelet of Mother's along with a pair of diamond earrings and a diamond necklace that Father gave me. My hair was pinned up, and I was wearing makeup as well.

"You look beautiful, Lady Merellis," Anna murmured with a sigh when she saw my finished look. I had learned the transformative powers of clothing and makeup from Nana—and was even impressed myself when I saw what wonders that magic could do as I looked into the mirror.

There was a knock on the door, and Enarene entered the room. "Excuse me, my lady. Lord Louis is here."

"All right. I'll be right there." I stood up slowly, not yet accustomed to the weighty dress. It felt like it was growing heavier with every step I took. Enarene showed me to the parlor, where Louis sat on the sofa waiting for me. He was also dressed in formal clothes with his hair slicked back.

He heard the door open and naturally turned his gaze toward me. For a moment, he just sat there with his mouth hanging open.

"D-do I not look good?" I suddenly felt very anxious. I was certain it had to look fine since Lady Aurelia designed it, but whether or not *I* looked good in it was up for debate.

The longer his pause dragged on, the more anxious I felt.

"You look beautiful," he finally said, frankly, easing my anxiety.

"What...?" At first I didn't grasp what he said, and it was my turn to stare at him.

"You look very, very beautiful." He rose and took my hand. My cheeks flushed when I felt the warmth of his fingers against mine.

"Th-thank you..."

He lifted my hand in his as if I were a princess. "May I have the honor of being your escort?"

"Yes, of course." I linked my arm through his. "It would be my pleasure, Lord Louis."

And so the two of us left the Anderson manor in our carriage. Today I was to debut in high society. The carriage was taking us to the palace.

"I'm so nervous."

“Don’t worry, Merry. There’s nothing for you to worry about. After all, my mother gave you a passing grade, right?”

“Still, Louis, I have to exceed everyone else’s expectations too. And if I don’t, then I’ll disgrace Lady Aurelia since she was my teacher.”

“This is your first battle in high society,” Louis murmured. “Of course you’re scared and anxious. But you need those things, right? Because feeling that way allows you to act more carefully.”

He was right. It sounded like a pep talk someone would give to soldiers before their first battle. However, it made perfect sense to me so I could accept it.

“Plus, it would take more than this to destroy you. You’ve worked so hard, and you have the courage to show off what you’ve learned. And, if it doesn’t go smoothly for some reason...”

“Yes?”

“Well, I’ll be there to back you up.”

I laughed. “Ha ha, that’s right.” I leaned my head on his shoulder. “You’re my future husband. I’m sorry if I’m complaining, but I’m fine. I’ll be fine as long as I have you. There’s nothing to fear when we’re together.”

“That’s right, Merry.” He gave me a proud look with a confident smile on his face.

Before long, we arrived at the palace. “After you, Merry.” He took my hand and helped me out of the carriage. He then slipped an arm around my waist to escort me. At events like this, a couple had to walk in perfect step together, but for me, this was easy. I trusted him so deeply.

There were other couples waiting in the hallway who were making their debut tonight as well. We got in line and waited for our audience with the queen.

Finally, it was our turn, and we entered the throne room. Louis slowly escorted me over to the throne. In this kingdom, there was no greater honor for the children of nobles than to have an audience with the queen.

Men would generally go by themselves, but women needed an escort. Most of the time it would be someone from her family, but if she was already engaged, then her fiancé would do it. That was why Louis

was my escort today.

The throne room was made for the highest-ranking person in the entire kingdom—the queen. It was a lavish, gorgeous place. Polished marble columns with gold accents lined the room. There was a deep red carpet atop the marble floor that ran down the middle of the room, leading all the way up to the throne. Since we were walking on the carpet, I couldn't look into the polished marble and use it as a mirror no matter how much I wanted to.

I wished I could look all around at the beautiful scenery, but I had to keep my head facing forward as we walked toward the throne. Finally, we arrived before it and stopped. I felt my entire body tense up as I curtsied.

“Lift your face,” the queen said, and I obeyed.

She was a middle-aged woman with an intimidating aura befitting a monarch. She wore a delicate, beautiful crown on her head that was reportedly made just for her.

“The oldest daughter of Marquis Anderson, Lady Merellis Reiser Anderson,” the attendant beside the queen announced me.

“You may talk to me directly.”

“I am honored, Your Majesty.”

“Merellis Reiser Anderson. At last, we finally meet.”

“I am terribly sorry about missing our previous engagement—the tea party. I am extremely happy to be here today, Your Majesty.”

I felt like the queen was staring quite intently at me. I wondered if she was sizing me up or if there was some other meaning behind it. Either way, if one wasn't prepared for a situation like this, it would be easy to shrink under such an intimidating gaze.

“That's quite a lovely dress.”

She suddenly changed the subject, and I tried hard not to let my confusion show on my face. I wasn't sure if I should take those words at face value, or...

“Thank you. My fiancé's mother, Lady Aurelia, designed it for me. I'm sure she'll be thrilled when she hears that Your Majesty complimented it.”

“All I did was tell the truth. It really does look wonderful on you.

And my, Louis, don't you look proud?"

Did the queen usually spend this much time on each couple at a social debut...? I couldn't help but wonder.

"Yes, Your Majesty. If you'll allow me to be blunt, I'm just beside myself worrying that some other man will try to take my beloved fiancée away from me!"

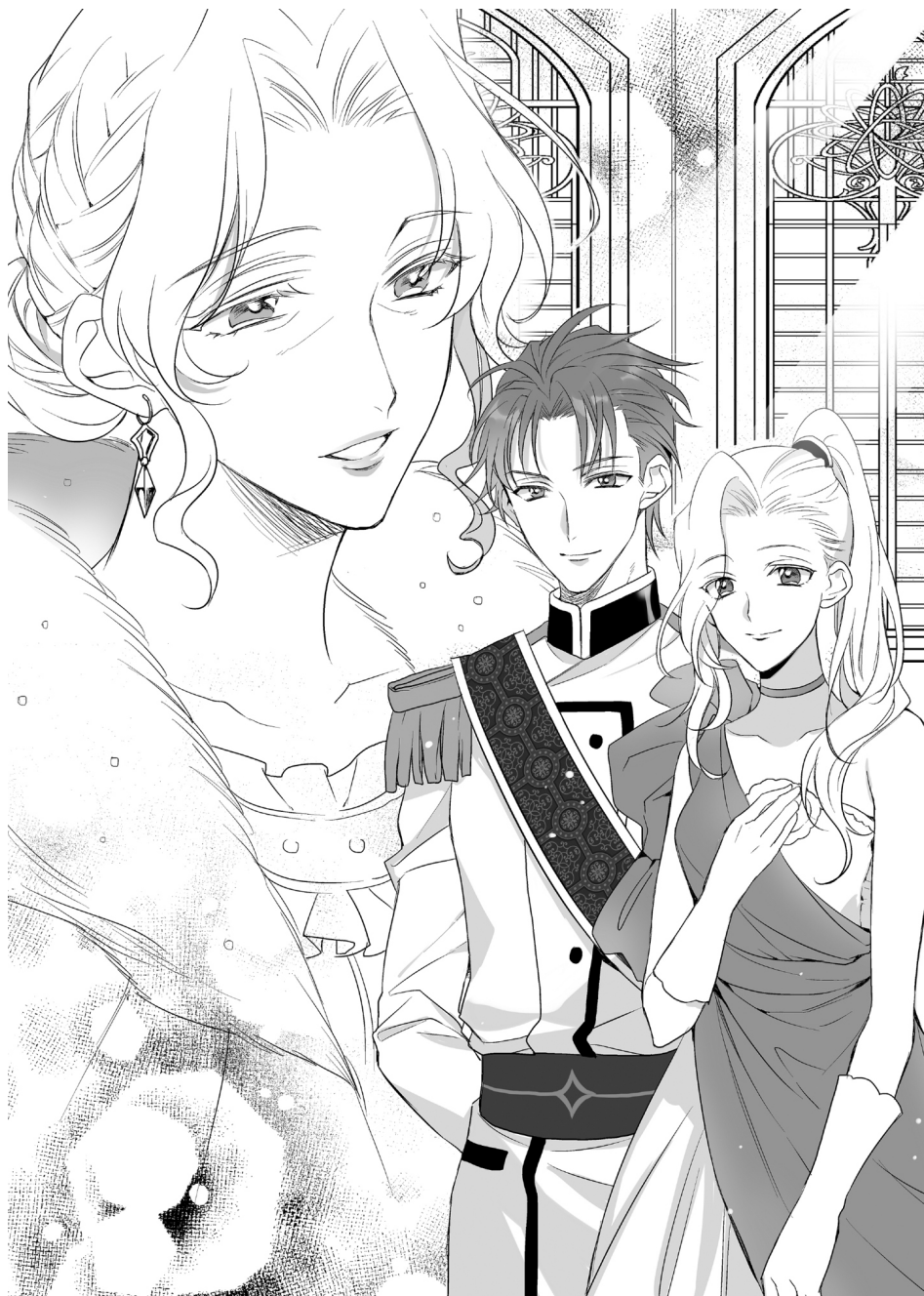
I felt my cheeks flush when he used those words to describe me in front of royalty.

"Goodness, you two must be very close! I can tell that Merellis feels the same about you, just by looking at her." The queen giggled, seeing the expression on my face.

"I do... I love him very deeply, Your Majesty. That is why I shall work very hard to become worthy of him."

"Worthy...? Actually, I feel like I can become a more worthy man with Merellis by my side."

Now the queen was openly laughing with amusement. "I was right—you two *are* very close! What a wonderful sight I'm seeing tonight. Merellis, I wish you the very best."



We both bowed our heads deeply in response. We then said our farewells and excused ourselves from the throne room.

At the banquet afterward, there was one name on everyone's lips: the infamous daughter of House Anderson who had made her debut tonight. House Anderson—the family that had the great hero Gazell Daz Anderson standing at the head. No one had ever seen his daughter Merellis Reiser Anderson appear in society before that night.

Normally, it was unheard of for no one to have ever laid eyes on a noble's daughter, even before her proper debut. Even newer noble families had their children play together and throw tea parties for them, after all. However, the girl in question had never participated in such things.

Not many people dared to talk about it due to General Gazell's power and influence, but there had been rumors that the girl was so homely that they did not dare allow her to appear in public. As time went on, interest in the girl waned and the rumors died down.

Before long, no one talked about her anymore at all, and the very idea of her faded from people's memories. At least that was until it was announced that the mysterious girl was engaged to the House of Armelia's son. At that point, the rumors spread like wildfire once more.

House Armelia was the most powerful noble family in the kingdom, producing a long line of prime ministers. Every family dreamed of marrying a daughter into the house. Some had approached the Armelias quite aggressively, but each time they were staved off and the son remained betrothed to no one as time went on.

So, of course no one—*no one*—would have guessed that he would become engaged to the daughter of House Anderson. The union would have very large implications, indeed, with the most obvious being that now the Armelias would be tied to the most powerful military family in the kingdom.

From now on, the Anderson girl would be receiving a great deal of attention from everyone—both good and bad. There would be some who would try to enjoy the new benefits from the Armelia family.

However, there would also be others who would fear one family getting so much power and try to interfere with the engagement. And some wouldn't be satisfied to just interfere—they would actively try to steal Louis away from her.

Seeds of this fervor were being planted all over during the banquet.

“Hello, Count Dranbaldt. You look like you're enjoying yourself tonight.”

Count Dranbaldt had been happy to observe the festivities but took a break to exchange pleasantries with his acquaintances. “Yes, quite. I'm looking forward to seeing the young couple everyone is talking about. Now that my son is engaged, we can sit back and enjoy ourselves as outsiders, watching things unfold.”

“That's true. Where is your son, by the way?”

“Over there, making the rounds with his fiancée.”

“Aha, I see. I'm envious that your son is the same age as the talk of the town. I'm sure he'll have plenty of occasions to mingle with them from now on. My own child isn't quite old enough yet.”

“That's true... I suppose I'm lucky in that regard.”

The room had been abuzz with excitement, talking about the couple of the hour. But as the two men chatted, a hush fell over the room, starting from near the entrance.

“I wonder what's going on over there?” Count Dranbaldt wondered aloud to his friend, who didn't answer. Thinking that odd, the count glanced over at the other man and then followed his gaze.

Count Dranbaldt then froze himself.

Everyone was staring at just one person—the girl being escorted by Louis de Armelia.

It was Merellis Reiser Anderson.

She had skin so pale it looked almost translucent and silky platinum blonde hair that looked more like spun silver. Her face was so perfect and exquisitely beautiful that she looked more like a doll fashioned by a master craftsman. Her soft, aquamarine eyes glittered like gemstones, the only characteristic of her that proved she was a real person and not an inanimate work of art.

Every single person in the room was rendered speechless, captivated by her otherworldly beauty. All they could do was stare at her, dumbfounded. Even the swaths of people who had crowded around the door hoping to be the first ones to greet the couple were stunned and could only silently watch them pass.

They slowly walked toward the center of the silent room. Even though all they were doing was walking together, it was like a scene out of a painting. Everyone in the room was entranced by her elegant movements. The pair stopped slightly short of the center of the room and then began talking. Louis and Merellis would gaze at each other every so often and smile adoringly. They were the perfect picture of a couple in love—and everyone watching could only agree.

Finally, the music stopped, and everyone turned toward the entrance once more. A few moments later, the queen appeared in the doorway. Behind her was the first prince, Edgar Rue Tasmeria. He had his mother's strong, deep blue eyes, and even while dressed in fine clothing, one could see how muscular he was. Every single noble girl in the room immediately turned on her charms when he made his gallant appearance. That was because the heir to the throne was not yet engaged.

Under normal circumstances, this would've been unheard of. However, just around the time when the selection process for the future queen would've begun, his father the king had passed away. Because of the customary mourning period, the selection was delayed.

"Everyone. I am so pleased to see that you are in good health. Much time has passed since our ceasefire agreement with Tweil, and the children of our kingdom are thriving in our peaceful time. Nothing makes me happier than to see *their* happiness. I can see that the start of a new era in Tasmeria is just around the corner. Tonight, we have guests in attendance from many generations. I hope that you all truly enjoy yourselves this evening." After the queen's address, the music resumed.

Merellis and Louis began to dance, and of course, everyone was watching them. When the song ended, they both shifted to new partners and began to dance once more. A slight buzz ran through the room at her new partner, because...

Merellis was dancing with Prince Edgar!

The crowd was astonished—Prince Edgar was even the one who

insisted Merellis dance with him. Up until this point, there had been no talk of him fancying any girl in particular. It was said he was an innocent young man, more interested in developing friendships with boys than falling in love with girls.

However, Merellis was already betrothed to Louis. After the dance was over, the two exchanged a few words and then parted, with Merellis dancing with another partner.

After several more songs, Louis took Merellis to greet some nobles here and there. And finally, the two appeared before the count.

“It’s lovely to see you again, Count Dranbaldt.”

“Ah, Lord Louis! It really has been quite some time! I’m envious that you have such a beautiful fiancée on your arm tonight!”

“Thank you. Allow me to introduce you to her properly. This is my fiancée, Merellis Reiser Anderson.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Count Dranbaldt. I’m looking forward to getting to know you more.”

“Likewise! It’s a pleasure to meet you as well. You know, my son is also in attendance tonight! Unfortunately, he’s not with me right now...” The count looked all around but could not locate his son. He frowned with disappointment.

“Oh, you mean Lord Dan? He’s been such a help to me at the academy.”

“Ha ha! I’m quite sure it’s the other way around! By the way, will you be studying at the academy this year, Lady Merellis?”

“Yes, I will. Lord Dan’s fiancée, Lady Foulard, will be attending this year as well, correct? I can’t wait.”

Count Dranbaldt was impressed that she was so well versed.

“By the way, Count Dranbaldt. I heard that your wife the countess traveled to Rubel the other day?”

“Oh, you know about that? Yes, my wife is quite fond of the seafood and porcelain there.”

“Oh, it’s no wonder! The seafood there is absolutely delicious! And Rubel’s porcelain really is quite stunning. I can see why the countess is so drawn to it.”

“Is that so? Do you happen to know a lot about porcelain, Lady

Merellis?”

“I’m embarrassed to say I don’t know as much as I should! But when I last visited Rubel, I was so impressed by how beautiful it was. I thought maybe I should begin collecting it!”

“Ah, I see. Well, in that case, would you like to come visit my home sometime? My wife has quite an extensive collection.”

“Oh, goodness! I would love to! As long as it’s not too much trouble...”

“Not at all! I’ll go ahead and send you an invitation.”

“Thank you so much!”

“Well, if you’ll excuse me.”

The young couple bowed their heads, and Count Dranbaldt stepped away to exchange pleasantries with another noble.

Once the banquet was over, Merellis and Louis got back into their carriage. The young woman’s head immediately fell onto Louis’s shoulder, either due to being released from such stress or from sheer exhaustion.

“You did a wonderful job,” Louis said gently to her.

“Thanks. It’s all because of you. I made a lot of acquaintances tonight.”

“All I did was help you make the connections. Now the rest is up to you.” He truly meant it. He had been astonished tonight watching just how easily she’d gotten so many of those nobles eating out of the palm of her hand. After he’d introduced her to the men, they all insisted she meet their wives as well, and before long she was chatting warmly with them like old friends. He wondered how many people she had made an impression on in just this one day.

Not only that, but to him, it seemed more like others had been honored to introduce themselves to her instead of her approaching them. It was like they wanted to help welcome her into the community of noblewomen and introduce her to everyone.

At any rate, he was surprised that she had so easily captured everyone's hearts in such little time. And it wasn't an innate ability; it had been the product of her daily hard work since she had become engaged to Louis. Not only had she attended his mother's lessons faithfully, but she had also read stacks of books on her own to build on her new knowledge. And once arriving at the banquet, she used each of her five senses to take it all in.

But most of all, her experiences talking with Lady Aurelia every day helped her bloom into the flower she had become tonight. As he pondered all this, he realized the young woman was even more important than he thought. He glanced down at her, and it seemed like she was already deep in the world of dreams.

They would arrive home soon, and he knew that. He half smiled but decided he would let her rest for a bit. A short time later, they arrived at the Anderson mansion.

"Merry..." He gently shook her, and she woke right away. "Morning, Merry."

"Louis...? Hm? What are you doing here?" She blinked sleepily several times, looking confused. Her head quickly cleared, and she sat up. "I-I'm sorry. I can't believe I fell asleep when you were so kind to take me home."

"It's fine. I'm sure you were exhausted. You should get to bed early tonight."

"Y-yes, I'll do that. Thanks, Louis."

He walked her inside and then climbed back into the carriage. He then returned home to the Armelia mansion.

"Oh! Welcome home, Louis." Romello was already there, relaxing on the living room sofa.

"It's unusual to see you anywhere but your study these days," Louis said, prompting a laugh from Romello. "May I join you?" he asked as he sat down across from his father.

"It's just as unusual for you to ask if you can join me."

"I suppose it is." Louis poured his father a drink.

"Merry looked beautiful tonight. I heard you were gushing over your fiancée to everyone too," Romello teased with a smirk.

Louis took a sip of his own drink with an impassive look on his face.

“It’s not every day the queen compliments you either.” Romello nodded over and over again, happily.

Louis glared back at him. “Seems like you have ears everywhere.”

“You’re just noticing that now?”

“Fair. I just wanted to say it.” Louis sighed with exasperation. “And I wasn’t gushing. I was just being honest with my feelings. Although...perhaps I did gush a bit in front of the queen.”

“You certainly seemed happy.”

“Of course I was. I’m not sure if it’s just my imagination, but when we had the audience with the queen, it seemed like she was very taken with Merry. So yes, it’s true that I gushed about her a bit.”

“Taken with the girl, eh? Well, I’m not sure about that, but she certainly struck a chord with Queen Iria somehow. After all, her son asked Merry to dance with him even though she’s engaged to you!”

Prince Edgar still wasn’t engaged. Banquets were occasions to meet the young ladies of high society. And although there was no need for the heir to the throne to be the one aggressively pursuing any ladies, it was still a good chance to narrow down some candidates for his fiancée by chatting and dancing with them.

For that reason, it was highly unusual that he asked Merellis to dance, since she was already betrothed. He should have been using that time to appraise one of the single ladies. The number of songs played during the banquet was decided beforehand, so there were only so many opportunities to dance with someone.

“Exactly. Then my hunch was right. Hopefully being engaged to the heir of House Armelia will keep him in check, but that gave me another reason to show just how in love we are.”

“I agree that was necessary, if you don’t intend on letting her go.”

“I do not. I don’t even think I could let her go if she asked me to,” he said firmly. And Louis meant it.

“No one likes a stubborn man.”

“Look who’s talking! I heard from Mother that’s exactly how you were when you pursued her too.”

“Hey now! Let’s not bring that up!”

“She said, ‘Hmm, I believe it was before I entered the academy. And your father...’” Louis ignored Romello and continued relaying the story Lady Aurelia had told him.

“I’m sorry, all right? Please don’t bring that up!” Romello apologized frantically, and Louis relented. His father had an unusually flustered look on his face. “Why in the world did Aurelia have to tell you those things...” he muttered. He wore a look of exhaustion like he’d just fought a hard battle.

“I asked Mother about it when I was young, thinking it might come in handy someday.”

“You always acted older than your years...”

“I did. Thanks to a certain someone.”

“Who? I’ll go complain to them!”

Louis smiled but coolly stared at Romello. His father instead cleared his throat to change the subject. “Anyway, about the matter with Rimmel... I’ll be meeting with them tomorrow.”

“Oh? You finally arranged everything then. That was awfully fast.”

“Yes, it was originally supposed to be several weeks from now, but it just so happened to be more convenient for both sides to meet tomorrow instead.”

“You’re going to visit the two moderate houses first, right?”

“Right. I’m going to confirm the results of our investigation with my own eyes. By the way, the only ones who know about this are the queen, the minister of foreign affairs, and a few staff members. And you, of course. I can’t make a big deal about the trip, so I’ll be leaving everything here in the guards’ and your hands. You’ve worked on the tasks before, so it should be easy for you, correct?”

“Yes. What will you do for protection?”

“Gazell is sending me several of his men. Although I do wish I could bring Gazell or Merry...”

“The stronger your guards, the fewer you have to bring, and then you won’t have as much to worry about, hm? Especially if you’re going incognito.”

“That’s right. But I know that wouldn’t work out, so that’s just how it is. Anyway, starting tomorrow, I’ll be leaving things in your hands.”

“All right.” Louis drained his glass, said good night to his father, and returned to his room. Once there, he finally loosened his tie and sat down. It was already way past midnight. Even though he would normally still be up at this hour, he was especially tired from the banquet. He sank back into his seat and looked up, staring absently at the ceiling as he lost himself in his thoughts.

“Lord Louis.” Suddenly Berne was behind him.

“Oh, Berne. What is it?”

“I just wanted to tell you that I shall be accompanying Lord Romello to Rimmel and that I will be working undercover there for a while. I wanted to bid you goodbye before I left.”

“Oh, is that right? How long will you be staying there this time?”

“It will depend on the situation, but probably six months to a year.”

“That long? You’ve been going back and forth for some time now, but it looks like this time you’ll be staying for quite a while.”

“Correct. The only reason it was possible was because Rimmel chose me to spy on Tasmeria. Apparently they think highly of my abilities too, but little do they know I’ll be a double agent.”

“It’s a shame you have to go since you were finally able to train at House Anderson.”

“I improved there very much, thanks to you. Even though it was only for a short while, I enjoyed my time with the first regiment. And because of that, I was allowed to train at House Anderson too.”

“General Gazell’s name goes very far.”

“It does. While I was there, I realized that his reputation isn’t just a sham. It’s the real thing. After seeing him and his men fight, I now understand why so many kingdoms fear him and his army.”

“All the more reason why we must defend his house. After all, it’s connected to the very defense of this kingdom.”

“I agree,” Berne nodded.

Louis let out a sigh. “Even though Wels’s punishment is permanent

house arrest, I doubt he'll just sit there obediently. We'll have to watch him and his surroundings very carefully. I only wish you could be here to help me."

"I'm sorry, Lord Louis. I wish I could do both."

"Of course you do. I'll just have to use another one of our operatives."

"Speaking of which, there is someone else I'd like to train..."

"Oh? Who?" Louis leaned forward with interest.

"Her name is Enarene. She's one of Lady Merellis's attendants. She's already been learning from the lady herself, and she's a skilled fighter. She's loyal to the kingdom and has a calm, even-tempered personality. She would be useful in going undercover where only women are allowed. I think she would be a suitable candidate to be trained as a female spy."

"I see... We'll take a look at her next time you come home."

"Very well. But I do think things would move faster if you could be the one who suggested it."

"All right, I'll take care of it then. I pray for your safety."

"Thank you." Berne bowed and then excused himself from the room.

Chapter 9: The Future Duchess Attends the Academy

TIME PASSED BY very quickly after my social debut, and before I knew it, there was less than a month before I would start at the academy. My days had been very busy since my debut, visiting various nobles I had met at the party.

First, I went to Count Dranbaldt's, then visited the houses of Count Caldina, Count Danas, Marquis Marea, Marquis Dungle, Marquis Filis, Marquis Rudolph, Count Telrose, and even more on top of those... Eventually, I went to visit every single person who had invited me at the banquet.

Actually, going around to all their homes made it easy for me to see who got along with who and to learn about the various power structures within the upper class. It was also highly advantageous to me because I got to hear gossip about each family's businesses and the states of their financial affairs. But, of course, there was no telling how much truth was in the rumors, so I had to take everything with a grain of salt.

Anyway, I realized that the wives were very sensitive to all kinds of information. Tea parties and other fetes were valuable sources of knowledge in high society. I didn't want all these connections I made to wither on the vine, so I planned to visit them again before I left for the academy. This time, I took the initiative and invited them all to my house.

However, planning to host an event yourself was incredibly nerve-racking. An event was an opportunity to show off your skills as a hostess. If it was boring, guests might leave unhappy and you'd be branded as a boorish person with no style whatsoever. After such a failure, you'd be lucky if anyone showed up at your future events at all.

I labored for hours, trying to figure out what kind of event I should have. I just attended a ball at someone else's house... I could have a banquet, but that was the least interesting option...although it could be the safest choice. I started making a list of things to remember for the event.

I ran out of paper and started rifling around in my desk to see if there was anything else to write on, and I finally found one more piece. I opened it up and noticed an address on it. It was the note the opera singer Brittany had given me—the girl I helped back at that village. It just so happened that I was just wondering what she was up to lately as well.

Right then, there was a knock at the door, and Anna entered my room. She expertly made me a cup of tea and set it down on my desk.

“Thank you, Anna. By the way, do you remember that opera singer, Brittany?”

“Yes, of course. Speaking of which, my lady, the last time I was in town shopping, I coincidentally saw that the opera troupe she belongs to is in the capital.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, the troupe is called *Étoile*.”

“*Étoile*?!” I shouted, jumping to my feet.

Anna blinked at me, startled by my reaction.

“That’s a famous opera troupe! It’s new, but it’s very highly regarded.”

At that time, it was probably one of the most famous opera troupes in the capital. Despite having less of a history, it was so popular that it was almost impossible to get seats.

“That’s right... That’s it! I’ll ask Brittany if she’ll come perform at my fete! Thank you, Anna!”

It was quite common for nobles to ask popular singers or musicians to perform at private events. People got tired of attending the same old tea parties and banquets over and over again, so it was important to make your event stand out.

I genuinely did want to see *Étoile* perform, so I immediately dashed a letter off to Brittany.

Preparations for my event continued. I sent out invitations, and before I knew it, the day of the party was here. I wore another dress made by Madame Crejours as I greeted my guests. At first, I thought maybe it was inappropriate to host the event all by myself, but since I was the only lady in House Anderson, I didn’t have much choice. Father

was also here to help greet my guests, though.

“Welcome, Countess Caldina!” He greeted the first guest to show up.

“My... It’s nice to see you, General Gazell. And thank you so much for inviting me here today, Lady Merellis. Did I arrive too early? I was just so excited to come that perhaps I got carried away!”

“Not at all! I’m not sure if I’ll be able to live up to your expectations, but I’ll do my best to make sure everyone has a lovely time.”

“He he. Oh, don’t be so modest! This really is amazing, though—I can’t believe Brittany from Étoile will be here! I’d expect nothing less from you, Lady Merellis!” Countess Dranbaldt looked positively over the moon with excitement.

“Oh, things just fell into place! I’m really looking forward to her performance as well!”

I wasn’t aware of it until after I got back in contact with her, but apparently Brittany was Étoile’s star singer. I’d all but given up on her coming and thought it was asking too much, but she responded by saying, “I’d love to come perform at the Anderson mansion if that will be helpful to Mer.”

Brittany was already on stand by, waiting to perform. I tried to suppress my excitement about her act and busied myself with greeting my guests. Once everyone had arrived, the party began.

Father gave a speech, and then it was time to enjoy Brittany’s singing. She gave a passionate performance of a scene from a popular opera. Her voice was so overwhelming and beautiful, one had to wonder how such a grand sound could come from such a small body.

But most of all, she sang with such intensity—even though she was only singing a part of the opera, we were all drawn into the story.

Once she was finished singing, everyone rose to their feet and gave her a standing ovation. The audience continued clapping even after she excused herself from the room. I could tell by the looks on my guests’ faces that my event was a success, and it was all thanks to Brittany. Now, the rest would be up to me. I’d be on my own as I went around to the various guests.

Now that the performance was over, I invited everyone into the

salon.

“Brittany’s performance was just superb!”

Everyone was talking about what we all just watched.

“It certainly was! I had tears running down my cheeks!”

“This opera is apparently her first starring role! You certainly wouldn’t think that, hearing her sing!”

The ladies were all abuzz as they sipped their tea, talking about Brittany.

“By the way, Lady Merellis—I heard you’ll be going off to the academy soon?”

“Yes, that’s right. I probably won’t be able to see you all for a while.”

“Oh, that’s a shame.”

“That’s kind of you to say.”

“Isn’t Prince Edgar entering the academy this year as well?”

“Yes, that’s right! Everyone’s *very* curious about this year’s new students!”

“Especially since Prince Edgar isn’t engaged yet! We’re all wondering if he’ll fall in love with someone at school!”

“Oh, is that right? I didn’t know that,” I said, even though I did know that, obviously.

“Well, of course you didn’t! After all, you already have a lovely fiancé.”

“That’s right. If I were younger, I would be beside myself with jealousy that you have a fiancé like Lord Louis!”

“Goodness!”

Everyone tittered at that. We all chatted about various things for a while, and all of my guests left with satisfied smiles on their faces.

My first time playing hostess had been a grand success!

A few days later, I was riding in a carriage on my way to the academy. I reflected on all the days that had led up to then since the banquet, and before I knew it, I had arrived at the campus.

The academy was on the edge of the capital and was attended by children of nobles. They received a proper education, of course, but it was also a place where they could make connections and build friendships with other nobles.

Once I arrived, I let Anna take care of my luggage while I headed to the auditorium. I ran into Louis on the way there. He was talking with a group of his friends, but it didn't look too serious, so I just went ahead and approached him casually.

"Hello, Louis."

He looked up when he heard his name, said goodbye to his friends, and walked over to me. "Welcome to the academy. I heard you've been quite busy lately. Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm quite confident in my stamina. Thanks for worrying about me."

After Lady Aurelia had given me a passing grade, I continued to visit her about once every three days. There was still a lot of things I had to learn, but more than that, I just enjoyed spending time with her. However, I was so busy answering invitations lately that I hadn't been able to go see her at all. Of course I let her know that in a letter, and she told me not to worry about it.

But it seemed as though I had greatly worried the Armelia family after all.

"All right... Well, I'm sure things will calm down once classes start, but make sure not to push yourself too hard."

"Okay. I won't."

It was frustrating not to reach out and touch him like I wanted to—people were watching us, so I had to maintain a certain level of politeness. If no one were here, I would've jumped into his arms. I was just that happy to see him.

"That uniform looks nice on you," he leaned close and whispered into my ear.

I felt my cheeks flush, and I bet they were bright red. "Thanks, Louis. You look good in your uniform too. So smart and dashing."

From this distance, surely no one else could hear us, so I spoke normally to him.

“Th-thanks.”

Just then, two boys from the group Louis had been talking to came up to us.

“Louis, we have to go get ready soon.”

“Hey, Doruna. You shouldn’t interrupt,” a boy with greenish-blond hair said to the red-haired boy, who was apparently named Doruna.

Louis and I looked at each other and chuckled sheepishly.

“Please meet my friends. This is Doruna Kataberia, and this is Phillip Sagitalia. They’re my classmates as well. And both of you, this is my fiancée, Merellis Reiser Anderson.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Louis’s fiancée, Merellis Reiser Anderson,” I introduced myself as was proper and bowed my head deeply.

When I lifted my head, for some reason they stared at me, frozen. I gave them puzzled looks and glanced over at Louis for help.

He let out an exasperated sigh and said, “Doruna, Phillip, come on.”

The young men jolted, snapping back to reality.

“Pardon me. Lady Merellis, you’re just so beautiful, I was speechless. I am Phillip Sagitalia. I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.” He politely took my hand and planted a kiss atop it.

Phillip Sagitalia... He must’ve been the son of Count Sagitalia, the Minister of Finance.

“I-I’m honored to meet the daughter of General Gazell, Lady Merellis. My name is Doruna Kataberia.” Doruna took my other hand and kissed it as well. If I recalled correctly, he was the son of Count Kataberia, who was the Minister of Defense.

“Thank you. I’m honored. I’m looking forward to getting to know you both.”



Neither of them could say a word.

“Lord Louis... Didn’t Lord Doruna here say you needed to be going...?”

“A-ah, yes. Sorry, we have some final checks we have to do before the ceremony. I’ll come see you again.”

“Okay. I’ll be waiting.”

Louis had to practically drag the two still-frozen boys away into the auditorium.

Now that I was alone, I took a good look at the building from the outside.

There were five main structures at the academy. There was the academy itself where the classrooms were, the auditorium, the cafeteria, the library, and the dormitory. From the ground floor entrance of the academy building, one could walk straight through to a long quadrangle. There were several archways supported by columns lining the pathways, giving it an austere feeling.

Then, there was the auditorium, where many events were held such as entrance and graduation ceremonies and balls. The cafeteria and the library were also as one would expect.

The dormitory was split up on either side of the academy building into two wings. The west wing was the girls’ dormitory, and the east wing was the boys’. They were connected by a very long hallway that cut through the main academy building.

I stepped back and looked at the scenery before me.

There was a courtyard right in the center of the quadrangle. The sun shone down on the green lawn, contrasting sharply to the plain white pathways constructed around it. I let my eyes wander around the courtyard and to the buildings I could see between the columns.

Finally, I noticed students were beginning to pour into the auditorium. I supposed it was time for me to go as well, and so I joined the crowd. The auditorium was plenty large enough to fit all the students inside with space to spare.

There was a podium situated in the front of the room, beyond which sat colorful stained-glass windows. The new students all sat near the front in no particular order.

“Welcome, students. We are so pleased to have you at our academy.” The ceremony began, and the headmaster gave a speech. It contained all of the typical language you would expect, like how this would be a place where we would learn many things and make many important connections, grow as individuals to serve the kingdom, and so on.

Once his speech was over, orientation began. I was surprised to see Louis step up to the podium.

Why is Louis up there? I wondered, but my question was soon answered. The academy had a student council, and Louis was its president. Now I understood why Doruna had urged him to hurry up and get ready.

Louis imparted a few tidbits about what life would be like here at the academy and what else the students would be doing today after this ceremony. I could hear impressed murmurs and even shrieks from the audience at his dignified presence—though all at a volume which wouldn’t disturb his speech, of course.

It made me glad and proud to see how popular he was here—but I was also a tiny bit jealous.

After that, orientation was over, and we moved into the academy building. There were four divisions of study here at the academy: the scholars, the knights, the clergymen, and the ladies’ courses. There were also general education courses everyone took, which included Tasmerian language, history, and classes on other subjects as well.

If you were interested in classes outside of your course of study, you could take them unless you were a woman—they were not allowed to take outside courses. And the opposite was true as well, as the boys were not allowed to take any classes inside the ladies’ course. In other words, the only classes that anyone was permitted to take regardless of gender were the general education classes.

Supposedly they didn’t take social status or grades into account when dividing up the classes, but I wasn’t sure how true that was. After I left the auditorium, I picked up my class schedule, reviewed it, and then went to my first class.

More than half of the students were already there. I recognized many of the others...and Prince Edgar was one of them. When I saw the son of Count Dilitry and the son of Count Dungleigh with him, I had a

feeling the class rosters weren't random at all.

It was likely that I was placed in this class because of my father's name. I looked around and made eye contact with the prince and gave him a little bow. I then took a seat. A few moments later, our instructor entered the room.

"Congratulations on your first day at the academy, everyone. My name is Eldran, and I'm the instructor for this class. It's a pleasure to meet you all. You'll be with this same group of people for three years, so why don't we begin with introductions? Let's start from the front right seat."

We then introduced ourselves, one by one. Everyone shared their name, house, and a few short sentences about themselves. I followed suit with the rest of them. After we were all finished, the door opened, and another staff member came in and exchanged words with Mr. Eldran.

"Thank you, everyone. We'll now go on a tour of the campus, so I'll be showing you around. Be prepared to walk for a while."

We all stood up and formed a line behind Mr. Eldran.

"The first, second, and third floors are all normal classrooms. As Lord Louis explained during orientation, each course of study has their own classrooms. After each lesson, please use your time to continue promptly to your next class. If there are ever any changes in room assignments, you will be notified during break times on this bulletin board."

The classrooms were identical except for the nameplates beside each door.

"The fourth floor has special classrooms with laboratories for mechanics and science courses." Mr. Eldran opened a door to one of these to show us, and the room was filled with all kinds of strange research equipment.

Biology, mechanics, and science were classes that were part of the scholar course of study. There weren't many people who chose those courses in an average year, but for a second or third son of a noble family who would have no chance to inherit a title or wealth, being a scholar was a good future career choice. The academy was a wonderful place for those people interested in these subjects.

Every year, there were one or two students who were very devoted to the scholar path. The most knowledgeable people in the kingdom became teachers, so it seemed like almost a waste. But from the students' perspective, I'm sure it was a dream to have such a small class size. And from a teacher's perspective, with so few students, they'd have more time to devote to their own research.

After we saw the labs, we went back down to the first floor and walked through the quadrangle in a clockwise fashion.

"Our library has the largest selection of books in the kingdom. It also has many rare books that are very securely guarded. The first rule of the library is that there are to be absolutely no fires lit inside at any time. Also, only books that are kept on the shelves are available to be checked out. Our rare books are kept under lock and key, so naturally those cannot be removed either."

We walked past the guards at the door and through the library. Shelves filled with tomes stretched high to the ceiling. There was a slightly musty smell of old books in the air. Just as Mr. Eldran said, the rare ones were kept locked up, and anyone entering the library with a bag was subject to having it searched. I figured it would be very difficult indeed to remove any of them from the building.

We left the library and continued toward the left, back to the auditorium where we started the day. "This is the auditorium, where the entrance ceremony was held earlier. A ball will be held here at the end of the school year as well." That was the only explanation given as we walked through the building and onward. We rejoined the path outside and continued down it, stopping at the entrance of the next building.

"This is the cafeteria. You will sit toward the left or right side of the room with your peers from your own dormitory. The right side is the men's side, and the left is the ladies'. There are no assigned seats, but in general, the third years sit toward the back, the second years in the middle, and the first years in the front."

The cafeteria had high ceilings and felt quite large. Its most distinctive feature was the huge stained-glass windows spaced at regular intervals, dispersing colored light as the sun shone through. There were also several portraits of people related to the academy hanging on the walls. Four long, narrow tables with chairs filled the hall. It looked like the table setting of a banquet, just on a much larger scale, so it was

quite intimidating.

“On weekdays, you will eat lunch and dinner here. If you have other plans, you must notify staff beforehand. It is your choice where to eat breakfast and meals on weekends, so there’s no need to notify staff if you eat elsewhere. Breakfast is served between six a.m. to eight a.m. and lunch is served from eleven a.m. to one p.m., so you may eat at any time during those hours. Dinner is served promptly every night at seven p.m., so please plan accordingly.”

“Now for our last stop, we’ll visit the chapel.”

We returned to the academy building and exited through the front. We walked toward the gates and saw the chapel coming up on the right side, surrounded by trees. Inside, the building held an altar and rows of long, simple wooden pews for worshippers. There were several columns standing inside, carved with angels and saints recognized by the Darryl Church, but nothing was too gaudy or over the top.

The chapel had a solemn yet soft atmosphere. Being in that peaceful space somehow made my heart feel cleansed.

We silently exited the chapel and returned to the academy’s main building.

“As the student council president explained, your rooms are listed on your schedules. After a week has passed, if you decide you want to take a class outside of your designated course of study, you must submit an application to me. And with that, I think that should do it for me. Soon, you’ll proceed to your respective dormitories, and student council representatives will explain those rules.”

After Mr. Eldran excused himself, a boy and a girl came into our classroom.

“I’m William, the student council treasurer and men’s dormitory leader.”

“And I’m Lora. I’m the ladies’ dormitory leader and the student council secretary.”

The boys and the girls split up to follow their respective leaders. As we walked down the hallway, we arrived at a building about the same height as the academy building. There was a reception desk immediately after the entrance.

“Every time you leave the dormitory, you must leave your room

key here at the front desk. If you tell the secretary your name and room number, they will return your key. Also, like you heard at the library, it is possible to check out certain books as well, and those can be returned here at the reception desk. If you are sick or unable to attend classes due to family circumstances, you can let the staff here know and they will take care of it for you. Also, you can send and receive letters and buy school supplies here. There's a list above the reception desk and in each of your rooms that details what's available for sale, so please check over that when you have a chance. Asking a staff member to buy something not on the list is strictly forbidden. Unfortunately, there are instances of that every few years, and students who do so will be suspended."

I could imagine the staff dealing with such requests. These noble children have never wanted for anything, and some might expect the same quality of life here at the dorm. The people hearing those frustrations would most likely be the front desk staff.

"There are some people who may be tempted to boast about their family's power to pressure the staff members. Please be aware that if you are caught doing this, your punishment will be even more severe. Keep in mind that this is the *royal* academy—in other words, it was built because of the royal family, and all the staff members here have vowed to serve the kingdom to their utmost abilities without caving to outside pressure. The student council will be watching over the students' actions, and the kingdom inquiry commission periodically investigates to make sure the staff are upholding their vows to the crown. They won't bend so easily."

In other words, the staff kept an eye on the students, the student council did the same, and then the organization keeping watch over everything was the kingdom's inquiry commission. I figured that the strict structure had been put in place to make sure the relationship between students and teachers never became inappropriate, because doing so would damage the integrity of the academy as a place of learning.

"Over this way, we have the infirmary. The doctor lives here on campus, so feel free to visit if you have any health concerns at all."

We had turned right from the reception area and walked into the pure white infirmary. There were three beds inside with shelves of all kinds of medicines on the walls. The desk was immediately to the left,

and a doctor wearing a white coat was already seated there. Lora bowed politely to him, and then we quietly excused ourselves back into the hallway and continued walking.

“This is the bath area. You may use the baths from four p.m. to six p.m. or from nine p.m. to ten p.m. Each room is equipped with a simple bathroom as well. Up ahead are the restrooms. There is a laundry facility in the basement where you can wash your clothes. However, this is not necessary; if you place your laundry into the numbered laundry bag you’ll find in your rooms, you can leave it in your room and an academy servant will collect the bag when they come to clean your quarters. They will return your laundered clothes the next day.”

We went back the way we came to explore the other direction past the reception desk.

“In the opposite area here is the café. They offer light snacks and drinks.”

There were several tall, round tables with chairs in the café. It seemed like most people took food and drinks up to their rooms rather than eat in this area.

“That’s it for the floors above ground. Any questions?” Lora asked, but no one said a thing. She looked around at us one more time and then climbed the staircase next to the reception desk. We came out into a large room. “This is the first-floor parlor. You may use this common room whenever you like.” There were several sofas with side tables situated throughout the room, as well as a pretty floral-patterned rug. The walls were covered in cute pink paper, and several beautiful religious paintings were hung upon them.

“If you go up those stairs, you’ll reach the residence rooms. Your room assignments are written on your schedules.” She pointed to the staircase in the corner of the room.

“If you need anything at all, I’m in room 201. Please don’t hesitate to come to me for anything at all. Sometimes I do get noise complaints, so please remember to be considerate of your classmates. Also, food and drink is permitted in your rooms. However, boys are *never* allowed in your rooms no matter what your relationship might be, so please be aware of that. You’ll find a pamphlet in your room with a detailed list of the rules, so please go ahead and read those as soon as possible. That concludes our tour of the dormitory.”

Everyone clapped for Lora, and then we all dispersed. I went to get my room key down at the reception desk and then went to my room—room 205. Anna had already unpacked my things so there was nothing else left for me to do but relax. There was a queen-sized bed in the center of the room, a study desk by the window, and a vanity on the opposite wall. A wardrobe sat next to the door, and then another door on the opposite side of that led to my bathroom.

I did as Lora suggested and read through the list of rules. Basically, I would be living life without my personal attendants while I was here. I was perfectly capable of taking care of myself, so I had no problem with this. At any rate, the academy's servants would do the cleaning and the laundry, so the only things I really had to do myself were dress and bathe.

The rule book did say though that in the case of formal balls, we were allowed to have our female attendants come to help us get ready. Those attendants would stay in the servant's quarters which were separate from the dormitory.

Once I was finished reading through the rules, it was already time for dinner, so I left the dormitory and headed to the cafeteria.

Everyone arrived promptly for dinner and sat down. Dinner was served family style with large plates at each table for the group to share, from appetizers down to the entrée. I chose a random seat and enjoyed my meal. After that, I bathed, got my things ready for the next day, and went right to sleep.

The classes in the ladies' course of study were pretty much just a review of the things Lady Aurelia had already taught me. The same went for the general education classes. In some ways, it was reassuring to know I wouldn't have a problem with the coursework and could just relax. I hadn't made any good friends yet, but I felt that would probably come naturally as time went on.

"Excuse me, you're Lady Merellis, aren't you?" I was relaxing with some tea in the parlor when someone came up to me. I thought the voice sounded familiar, and I saw Lady Sharia standing there. Her full name was Sharia Lulu Telrose, and she was one of the noble girls that I

had saved after being kidnapped in the capital.

“Yes, that’s right. You’re Lady Sharia, am I right?”

“I’m honored you remember me. May I join you until the next class?”

“Of course.”

Sharia sat down across from me. She had actually tried to talk to me several times during our general education classes. Under normal circumstances, one of a lower rank must never speak to someone of a higher rank unless first spoken to, but not here at the academy. Otherwise, no one would ever be able to develop any friendships here. I was wondering when she would come talk to me, but I had let her do it at her own pace.

Also, since she knew me as Mer, I was afraid to approach her for fear of having my secret exposed.

“Lady Merellis, I’ve wanted to thank you for some time but haven’t been able to... Please forgive me.”

“Thank me?”

“Yes. Your bodyguard saved my life. Do you remember the kidnappings in the capital several years ago? I was actually one of the girls who was kidnapped...”

Although everyone was aware of the incident, the victims’ names had never been made public. It was to protect the girls from unwanted attention. That was probably why none of them had ever spoken about it outside of their families either.

I wasn’t sure whether the fact that she revealed the truth so easily to me was because she wondered if Mer and I were one and the same, or whether she was just that bold and strong a person.

“Is that right? Mer did tell me all about the incident. I’m glad you’re safe.”

“What? Y-yes, that’s right. That’s all because of Mer. Thank you so much.”

“No need for thanks, she was just doing her duty. But I know she would feel extremely honored to hear that someone she saved expressed their gratitude to me.”

“Lady Merellis...” She began to say something but then thought

better of it.

“Yes?”

“Nothing. It’s just... I’m so glad to finally meet you, and I’d love it if we could become friends.”

“Of course. I feel the same way.” I answered without hesitation. As we talked with each other, I did think I’d like to be friends with her. I appreciated the way she didn’t put on airs.

I had always liked her, in fact. So much so that I had wanted to tell her right away that I wished we could be friends.

“Thank you so much for protecting us. We’re all safe. We couldn’t possibly thank you enough.”

“How can we ever thank you for doing that for us? Thank you so much!”

Even now, I treasured the words she said after I saved them. I was overjoyed that someone else had validated the path I was going down and relieved that I had saved their families from the same fate as I’d suffered. In fact, she was the one who had saved me.

“I’m looking forward to becoming close friends with you, Lady Sharia.”

“Good for you,” Louis said after I told him about my encounter with the young woman.

“I know. I was hoping to become friends with her, but I just couldn’t approach her myself.”

“She’s the daughter of Count Telrose, right? I heard that she had been sick for a while and that’s why she had disappeared from the public eye, but the real reason was because of the kidnapping...”

“Really? Is that what people said?”

“Yes, and the timeline coincides exactly to when the kidnappings occurred. And from what you told me about her, I have a feeling it wasn’t her idea, but her parents’. They were probably too worried to send her out into the public eye again.”

“I see...”

The two of us were in the courtyard, which was on the opposite side of the chapel. Even though we were engaged, there weren't many places where Louis and I could relax together. Not only were we in different years, but the academy was quite strict about keeping the men and ladies separate except for in general classes. The courtyard ended up being a very important place for us.

It was a popular location, not just for couples but as a place for everyone to relax and get out of the cycle of going back and forth between the classrooms and the dormitories. For that reason, we were incredibly lucky to get a bench to ourselves. I was sitting now with my head leaned against his shoulder.

“Are you taking any other classes outside of the scholars' course, Louis?”

“I wanted to, but I have to help Father. I also have my work with the student council, so I just don't have time to take extra classes.”

“Oh... Are you very busy with the student council?”

“I wouldn't say I'm busy, but it does take up some of my time. If I find myself free, I do drop in on elective classes here and there.”

“Wait, you can do that?!”

“You can. It's especially welcome with the classes that have a small number of students.”

“That's wonderful. The ladies are highly discouraged from taking extra classes, and even if they *did* manage to get permission, it seems as though it would be looked down upon...”

Personally, I didn't see why working harder at school would be a problem. However, since this was a noble academy, the number one thing you had to worry about as a lady was your reputation. If you stood out too much from the crowd, it could work against you. If your reputation started to suffer, it would be very difficult to turn it around.

Once again, I was confronted with the fact that women had very limited options in this kingdom—just like how I wasn't allowed to join the army.

“I suppose it would be difficult to take classes in the knights' course.”

“How did you know that was what I was interested in?”

“Anyone who knows you would.”

“Ugh, I guess you’re right. I just can’t help but be curious though. I wonder what a training course is like when my father isn’t in charge of it.”

“They definitely wouldn’t let you take a class in the knights’ course, but no one will outright say no to you taking an elective. I’ll leave it up to your judgment.” He patted me on the head.

It made me happy that he trusted me so deeply. “Okay. I knew you’d say that, Louis.”

“By the way, can I recommend a place for you to train?”

“What?!” I definitely wasn’t expecting him to say that.

“You know how there’s a forest next to the courtyard?”

“Y-yes...”

“There’s a building deep in the forest that’s not being used right now. It used to be a training building for the knights, but there were so many people joining the knights’ course that they needed more room, so they built a new training building behind the auditorium. The building in the forest is locked, but I have the key.”

“What?! I can train there?”

“You can. They don’t want to waste money from the budget to tear the building down, but they don’t have any other plans to use it at the moment.”

“Thank you so much, Louis!” If we weren’t in public right now, I would’ve thrown my arms around him.

“I should probably get going.”

“Oh...right. I wish we could’ve spent a bit more time together.”

“Don’t tempt me,” he gave me a smile. I looked down apologetically. “Let’s meet again soon.” He gently kissed me on the cheek, and I returned the favor.

“Of course. Can I walk halfway with you?”

“Sure. It’s not far to the academy building, but I’d love for you to walk with me.”

I took his hand and walked beside him.

“G-good afternoon, Lady Merellis.”

“Oh, hello, Lord Ruud.”

“Oh, Lady Merellis! It’s nice to see you.”

“Good afternoon, Lord Beryl.”

As we walked, several of my classmates said hello.

“It looks like you’re quite popular,” Louis remarked after the fourth or fifth instance of this happening. His voice was low and had a hint of irritation in his voice, which was unusual for him.

Meanwhile, I was very happy. Because the more irritated he was, the more it showed me that he loved me.

“I’m just saying hello. They’re my classmates, after all.” I always felt a dark shadow inside of my heart when I saw Louis talking to other girls. Sometimes I felt badly about it, but I just couldn’t help it. Of course, I never let it show, and I kept it to myself.

I couldn’t very well ask him to stop talking or looking at other girls, after all. I didn’t want to get in his way, and I certainly didn’t want to stand in the way of his dream, so all I could do was suppress those dark feelings.

To be honest, I wanted to be the only thing on his mind. I wanted him to be so full of me he might drown. It was a very greedy thought, but that was precisely why it made me happy to know that he felt the same way.

“Do you really think I’d be interested in anyone else but you? They’d all run for the hills if they found out the truth about me,” I said.

He let out a little sigh. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t fair of me.”

“It’s all right. It made me happy.”

“Did it?” He chuckled wryly, and I wondered if he sensed that I felt the same. He didn’t say anything else, though—he just kissed me on the cheek again. “Well, this is where we part. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay. Take care, Louis.”

As we said goodbye, he passed me the key. I looked at it in my hand. It was the perfect timing, as I was just thinking about how I would love some exercise. I only had one more class left for the day, so afterward I’d go train.

“Lady Merellis? May we have a moment?” Suddenly a group of three girls approached me. I didn’t recognize them, so I figured they must’ve been older than me.

“I’m sorry, but I have to go to class. May we chat afterwards?”

“...You’re disobeying your upperclassmen?”

“Would a good upperclassman invite someone somewhere with complete disregard for their obligations?”

They knew full well how rude they were being, but my response just made them angrier.

“Please invite me again after my class is over, and then we can have a chat.” I left, thinking that things were really getting interesting now. I turned the corner and then stopped. I wanted to see who had been following me. And as expected, that person bumped right into me once they turned the corner as well.

“Goodness! Pardon me, Your Highness.”

Surprisingly, the person who had been watching me was none other than Prince Edgar.

“No, pardon me.”

I slowly took a step backward. Why had he been following me?

“Are you really going to take those girls on?” he asked. At first, I didn’t understand what he meant, because I didn’t expect him to ask me such a question.

“Did you overhear our conversation, Your Highness?” I asked, now knowing that he indeed had.

“I just happened to be passing by.” His eyes darted away. It was a pathetic excuse. After all, the girls had approached me outside of the ladies’ classrooms.

“I think ‘taking them on’ is a bit strong. I was just accepting their invitation,” I said, getting back to the topic at hand.

“You sound pretty confident for a battle of three against one.”

“Confident? I was just curious as to what they could have to say to me. Plus, three against one... Certainly my upperclassmen wouldn’t do anything nefarious. Are you sure you aren’t overreacting, Your Highness?”

“Most girls would be terrified after being called out by a group of older girls here.”

“You’re funny, Your Highness. Did you come here to talk about the disposition of women with me?” He hesitated for a moment. “I will say one thing... What you’ve seen of young women so far is but one small side of them.”

He opened his mouth to say something but then closed it again.

“If you’ll excuse me, Your Highness, I must go to my next class.”

I left before he could say anything else.

“We’ve come to see you again, Lady Merellis.” Right after class, the older girls were waiting for her.

“Goodness. I admire your perseverance, ladies,” Merellis said coolly as she followed them.

Sharia happened to be walking by and saw the group. She had a bad feeling about this, so she decided to follow. The three older girls walked silently with smiles plastered to their faces. Sharia watched them closely, trailing behind far enough so that no one noticed her. Once they arrived at a deserted spot behind the library, the girls stopped. She hid in the shadows so no one would see her.

She noticed someone else was hiding there too. “Your Highness?!” she exclaimed, but thankfully she was quiet enough that the other girls didn’t hear.

“Shh.” Edgar put a finger on his lips and gestured her to come closer.

“We finally get to talk to you, Lady Merellis.”

The girls hadn’t noticed Edgar and Sharia’s presences.

“Yes. Thank you for waiting until my classes were done,” Merellis said with a smile. Her completely confident attitude had the three girls a bit flustered for a moment. “Now, what was it that you wanted? I’m sorry to say I haven’t the faintest idea what you could want to speak to me about.”

“It’s about Lord Louis,” the girl in the middle said, glaring at her.

“Oh? What about Lord Louis?” Merellis wasn’t intimidated by the girl’s anger at all. In fact, she blinked innocently at her, egging her on.

“If you *really* call yourself Lord Louis’s fiancée, you need to know your place!” the girl responded in a low, threatening voice.

“And what does that mean exactly? I’m sorry, but I’m not quite understanding what you’re trying to say here.”

“You don’t understand? Well! I certainly don’t think you’re worthy of marrying into the Armelia family!” The girl laughed scornfully, and the other two joined in.

“Thank you for the warning, but could you be kind to a younger student and explain *exactly* what you mean by that?” Merellis answered calmly, the smile still on her face.

“Listen. Lord Louis is *busy*. Just because you’re his fiancée doesn’t give you the right to hog all of his time!”

“That’s right! And it’s positively unsightly the way you act so intimate with him all the time! Just what are you trying to do, damage his reputation?!”

“A weak, sickly girl like you couldn’t possibly be fit for the role of wife to the heir of House Armelia!”

The three girls’ words were like spears shooting one after the other. It kept escalating to the point where it was getting unbearable to hear. Edgar frowned and started to stand to go put a stop to it.

“Please wait, Your Highness...” Sharia said.

“Why?” He gave her a questioning look.

“Just wait... Just a bit longer, please.”

While they were talking in the shadows, the situation had taken an unexpected turn. They now heard Merellis laughing softly. “Again, thank you for the warning. It was *very* educational to hear your opinions.”

For a moment, the girls stared blankly at Merellis as if they had no idea what she had just said, their eyes wide.

“Wha—”

“Well? Is that all you have to say to me?”

“How dare you speak to your upperclassmen with such an attitude!”

Merellis laughed with amusement in response to the girls’ annoyance. “Upperclassmen? Hm, that’s strange. Would my seniors truly call a younger student out, lead them to a deserted area, and then insult and threaten her? Certainly not!” Her voice was no longer soft. Her tone was so icy it sent shivers down the spines of all who heard, and her gaze was deadly serious and sharp as a blade as she glared at the girls.

Everyone watching was speechless.

“And on what basis have you decided I am not worthy to marry into House Armelia? My engagement was arranged by my father, the war hero General Gazell Daz Anderson and this kingdom’s prime minister, Duke Romello Gib Armelia. Do any of you three have the authority to override their judgment?”

“Wh-what’s your problem? All you can do is brag about your family’s power...”

“If that’s how you want to interpret it, that’s your own problem. I’m sure it’s impossible to say anything that will change your minds, since all you’ve done is scrape the bottom of the barrel for negative things so you can try to discredit me. I’m incredibly thankful that you’ve approached me and given me the chance to hear you out. Now I know for certain that there are people like *you* here at the academy.” She smiled, her expression softening a bit. “At any rate, I don’t need your permission or your acceptance. No matter what anyone has to say about it, I am Louis de Armelia’s fiancée. We’re in love, and nothing you do or say will *ever* change that.” Her words were even sharper than before, and all the other girls could do was close their mouths.

“...I knew it,” Sharia whispered.

“Knew it? What did you know?” Edgar whispered back.

“Huh? Oh...” Sharia’s eyes darted back and forth. She had been so captivated by the scene which had unfolded before them that she utterly forgot he was even there. She let out a sigh. “I mean, I know the reason why Lady Merellis just went along with those girls.”

“What do you mean?”

“To Lady Merellis, those girls’ gossip is completely petty and trivial.”

They're like annoying flies buzzing in her ear. Why be afraid of them when all you have to do is shoo them away with one flick of your hand? I'd expect nothing less from General Gazell's daughter."

"You look awfully happy."

"Yes, I am. I can't help it. She's my idol," Sharia whispered as if she were singing. Her cheeks were rosy, and her eyes were glistening with excitement. She was beaming and beautiful, looking almost like a girl in love.

Edgar found himself captivated as well and felt his heart begin to race. "Do you want to become a strong woman like her?" he asked awkwardly, trying to conceal how flustered he was feeling.

"Strong...? Yes, perhaps. I greatly admire her spirit. She doesn't bend to anyone."

"I see... So that's your idea of inner strength."

"Exactly. She's proud and independent. She watches over and protects others with her strength. She's like a wolf...the king of the forest. What woman witnessing that scene wouldn't admire her?"

"I see..."

"It looks like Lady Merellis is returning to the ladies' dormitory, so I should be doing the same. If you'll excuse me, Your Highness."

"O-of course." Edgar stared after her, stunned, as Sharia happily rushed after Merellis.

After I was done dealing with the seniors, I went back to my dormitory. I sat down on a sofa in the parlor and sipped my tea that I'd ordered from the café. Perhaps it was rude of me to say it, but I knew those girls didn't stand a chance against me. I had a feeling it would end up like that when they were foolish enough to call me out in front of everyone outside the classroom. Lady Aurelia had told me all about spats among young women, and the ones she described were much more cunning and dirty.

I closed my eyes and surrendered myself to a sea of my own thoughts. Louis seemed to be quite popular with the girls indeed. And

they didn't like the fact that he had a fiancée. After all, who could blame them when you thought about his family's money and power? All I could do was be grateful that the older girls were stupid enough to come directly to me already. It was still possible there would be girls more cunning than them too, just as Lady Aurelia had said.

"I have no intention of running away though," I murmured out loud. I opened my eyes—luckily no one else seemed to have heard me.

"May I join you, Lady Merellis?" Suddenly Sharia came over to me.

"Hm? O-oh, yes. What is it, Lady Sharia?"

"Thank you. I was just hoping to chat with you for a bit... It's kind of a private matter."

"Would you like to come to my room?"

"May I?"

"Yes, of course." *Has she guessed my secret?* I couldn't think of what else it could possibly be as I led her to my room. "Come on in." I gestured to a seat and sat down across from her. "What did you want to talk about?"

"I'll just get right to the point... You're Mer, aren't you?" Her eyes were filled with certainty and resolve.

"It sounds as though you're very certain, so I suppose any denial on my part would be pointless."

"So then..."

"Yes. As you guessed, I am both Mer and Merellis," I answered with a sigh. "When did you guess?"

"From the very start."

"That soon?" I said with surprise.

"Yes. From the very beginning." She smiled at me.

"But how...?"

"Thank you so much for protecting me. That's the only reason I'm here today. I honestly cannot thank you enough," she said, echoing the words she said after she was kidnapped. "I could never forget you. Even though you said Mer was just your body double, I felt from the moment I laid eyes on you that you and Mer were one and the same. I just knew

it.”

I had to laugh. So *that* was why she had looked so bewildered when we first talked at school. “I’m sorry for the ruse. You knew the truth and yet you still went along with my story, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did! I owe you my life.”

“Well, if you knew the truth, why did you want to confirm it with me? As I said, you were so certain that me denying it would have been silly.”

“Actually, I have to admit that I happened to see your exchange with the older girls earlier... I know you don’t need me to be, but I was worried about you, Lady Mer. I was prepared to go call a teacher if things got too ugly.”

“Oh, I see... It’s fine. Thank you so much for being concerned about me.”

“Of course... But as I said, it was clear that it wasn’t needed. Also, there was one other person who witnessed the exchange.”

“Was it Prince Edgar?”

“You knew?”

“Yes. For some reason, it feels like he’s investigating me. Although I can’t think of why a prince would have any interest in me.”

“Was he looking for you?”

“It seemed like it, but I have no idea why he would have business with me. Well, no matter. You came to confirm it so you could tell me that too, didn’t you? Thank you.”

“Of course.” She smiled softly after I thanked her.

I gazed at her, thinking about how pretty she was.

“Forgive me for being selfish, but... Do you think this means we can become even closer now? You said you wanted to become friends with me, and yet here I was, practically deceiving you,” I said, after I pulled myself back to reality. Having this conversation with her just solidified my desire to be her friend.

“Oh, I never thought you were deceiving me! In fact, I don’t blame you at all! I’m sorry for being so forward and revealing your secret. I’d love to be close friends with you!”

And so after that, Sharia and I became fast friends. When we weren't in class, we were always together. I could be myself in front of her, just as I could with Louis, and it was tremendously freeing. To be honest, she was my first female friend. I was so thrilled about it that I quickly introduced her to Louis.

"Still, Merellis, what do you think the prince has up his sleeve?"

"I have no idea. It's been some time since then, and he hasn't said a word to me since. I'm stumped."

"Interesting..."

"By the way, Sharia, what are you planning on doing during our break from school?"

"It's too much trouble to go home to Telrose, so I think I'll just stay at the mansion in the capital. How about you?"

"Oh, really?! Well, that means we'll be able to see each other! I was planning on staying in the capital too."

"I can't wait! There's this café I've been dying to go to. We can go together!"

"In that case, leave it to me. I shall protect you, my lady."

"He he he... You sound like a prince. Actually, you're more dashing than any prince!"

"I'm honored to hear that."

The two of us burst out laughing.

Right before break, we had to take exams in all of our classes, and of course no one wanted to get a failing grade. Still, not everyone was aggressively studying for their exams. For example, the information we studied in the ladies' course was common knowledge for nobles, so there wasn't really much need to review it. All one really had to do was look over the material the night before.

Once my own exams were over, I took a walk alone in the courtyard. Sharia couldn't come as she was in her room studying for a subject that was giving her trouble.

I turned around, feeling someone watching me. "What are you doing back there, Your Highness?"

He didn't try to hide or run away. He just stood there. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Is that right? May we talk here, then?" I suggested. I certainly couldn't be alone with the prince somewhere, so here under the blue sky was a more proper place.

"Yes, of course. Fortunately, there aren't many people out and about today because of the tests."

"Well, Your Highness? What is it?"

He paused. "My mother ordered me to observe you."

I certainly wasn't prepared to hear that information and quickly tried to process it.

"No... Perhaps 'observe' isn't the proper term. She ordered me to get close to you, and so I began to watch you."

"She asked you to get closer to me? Huh. Well, what were the results of your investigation?" I asked.

His eyes widened for a moment as he stared at me, but then he laughed. "My results? You're not even going to ask why?"

"Well, I figured once you told me your results, the reason why would be made clear."

"I see. Well, my conclusion was that I don't think you and I are a good match. My mother is extremely fond of you, you see. First of all, you and Louis are extremely close, and I just don't think I stand a chance. So...I shall convince Mother that I cannot marry you unless she is prepared to make an enemy out of House Armelia."

"Ahh, I see. She wants me in her family because of my father's name. Is that right?"

"To put it plainly, I think so."

"Are you sure it's all right to be speaking so frankly with me like this?"

"You have no desire to marry me and become queen, correct?"

"That's correct, I don't."

"I thought it would be best to be honest with you and gain your

trust. You're General Gazell's daughter, and you'll be marrying into House Armelia. As the future king, I'd like to build a good relationship with you."

"I see. So this is all from the queen's desires, not yours..." I was angry for a moment at the thought of her trying to separate Louis and me, but I calmed myself. I couldn't get carried away by my emotions, so I tried to put my thoughts in order.

The queen wanted to use my father's name and power to the fullest and marry me off to her son, who was not engaged—despite knowing that I was already betrothed to House Armelia. She thought perhaps if the prince and I got closer, I would change my mind. She greatly underestimated my feelings for Louis. I truly believed the prince when he said this was not his idea but his mother's. Otherwise, why would he be telling me all this?

"That's right."

"I see... Well, thank you for being so candid. I'll do my utmost to live up to your expectations, Your Highness."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"May I ask you something else though, Your Highness?"

"What is it?"

"Why else don't you think we would make a good match?"
I asked.

He gave me a mischievous smile. "Because we're too similar."

"Are we?"

"Yes. I think there are certain types of people in the world. For example, they can either choose to act or to be still, or in other words, you either choose to attack or to defend. I tend to attack. I think for myself first and then act on my decisions. I was raised that way too, but in general, I prefer to stand on the front lines and act. I think you're the same way. If your house was in danger, you wouldn't sit inside and protect yourself. You would go outside and aggressively hunt down the enemy. Now, since we're both attackers we would make great allies. But as companions...? I'm not sure that would work out."

"I see... When you become king, you'll have to gather all sorts of input. I can understand that you might need a different point of view by your side. However, you said that I would go outside and be on the

offensive? I'm not sure how I feel about you saying that about a lady such as myself, Your Highness..."

"It's just a figure of speech. Of course, I don't *really* think you'd go out and hunt down enemies. The analogy just came to mind since you're General Gazell's daughter."

I inwardly sighed a breath of relief that he hadn't literally pictured me with a sword, fighting off enemies.

"Oh ho! Even if it's a figure of speech, you really should be more polite with ladies, Your Highness!"

"You're absolutely right. Please excuse me. As an apology, I'll give you special permission to ask me any question you'd like, and I shall answer it."

"Hm? A-all right. However, Your Highness—is it really a good idea to say you will answer *anything*?"

"Well, I know that you wouldn't ask me anything too strange."

"I see. In that case, I'd like to ask you a question, not as a woman but just as a citizen of this kingdom. Is there someone else you have your sights on?"

"What will you do with that information?"

"I'm just asking out of pure curiosity. I have a feeling you already have someone in mind."

He burst out laughing. "You're very observant. Yes, there is someone I fancy." He leaned over to me and whispered in my ear.

"Goodness!"

"But you must keep it a secret."

"Of course I will. The entire kingdom is looking forward to your engagement, after all. I know that you'll put a lot of thought into it. Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help." I took a step backward and curtsied—the kind of curtsy one would do before a king.

"I will. I'm sorry for taking up your time."

"Not at all. If you'll excuse me." I bid the prince goodbye and left him.

“I see... I knew the queen had her sights set on you to become the prince’s fiancée.”

I went straight to Louis and told him everything. He listened quietly to me, and that was the first thing he said.

“Oh? Did you find something out too?” I leaned forward and asked him.

It was nice that I could be as loud as I wanted to here. We were in the former knights’ training building, which was now my personal training building, and only we had the key. This was the only place where we could be alone, and thus the only place where we could talk about things like this.

“No, I just had a hunch when we had our audience.”

“Oh?”

“Remember how the queen took an awfully long time with us at your debut?”

“Oh, right... I thought that was strange too. At the time, I wondered if she gave everyone that much attention.”

“Of course not. I’m not sure why you struck a chord with her so much, but I could tell right then that she was incredibly fond of you. So much so that she told the prince to ask you to dance.”

“Ahh, I see. So that’s what happened.”

I relaxed and leaned against his shoulder. Lately, we’d been coming here regularly together. I wondered if he was coming more because he didn’t want people to see us together. It might’ve been his way of protecting me after those older girls had called me out.

“Well, it’s for the best that the prince has his sights set on someone else anyway. He’ll get who he wants, no matter how difficult it is. He’ll work at it until he succeeds. That’s just the kind of person he is.”

“So that was his way of showing that he trusts me?”

“Yes, and also letting me know he has no intention of trying to steal you from me.”

“Were you worried about that, Louis?”

"I was. The Armelias may not be a military family, but I was preparing myself for battle against the royal family."

"Oh? And you were determined not to lose?" I teased.

"I'm not sure if I would have, but...I just know that I don't want to lose you." He let out a sigh, and a sheepish grin came across his face.

"Ha ha ha. I have no intention of being stolen away from you. You're my home. So never let go of my hand, okay?"

"All right." He squeezed my hand. I looked down at it and smiled.

Now that exams were over, it was time for a break from school. Thankfully, my tests went smoothly. Otherwise, I would've been too embarrassed to show my face in front of Lady Aurelia again.

I stood at the campus gate with my bag. Since everyone was leaving the dorms today, there were a lot of people waiting at the gate for their carriages.

"Anna! It's so good to see you again." A carriage with the Anderson family crest pulled up, and Anna got out of it.

"And it's lovely to see you as well, Lady Merellis. Everyone's been waiting for you." she said as I climbed into the carriage.

"Ha ha ha. I can't wait to see everyone too. I'm eager to see how strong everyone has gotten!"

"They're all looking forward to showing you." She gave me a reassuring smile, and I laughed.

"Goodness..." We chatted for a while and finally arrived back at the Anderson mansion. "I'm home, everyone!"

"Welcome home, my lady!" All the servants greeted me. Even though I'd only been gone a few months, it felt like I'd been gone for ages.

My brother was standing there waiting for me too. Since he had already graduated from the academy, he was gaining more experience to take over for my father as the head of household. When I asked him why he wasn't going to join the army, he told me, "I want to protect

those closer to me instead of the kingdom.” And since that was his decision, of course I had no objections.

“How’s life at the academy? I want to hear all about it.”

“Of course!” I skipped into the house, thrilled to be home.

“I’d expect nothing less from you, Mer. Even though you’ve been away for so long, you’re just as sharp as ever,” Anna said as she sat on the ground, panting.

“I’ve been training every day on my own at the academy, but it seems like I haven’t been doing as well as I thought. It seems my stamina has dropped a bit...”

“Still, I can’t believe I couldn’t even take one point from you, Mer!” Enarene muttered, looking frustrated.

“Even so, I can tell how hard you girls have been training. You’re faster and sharper than before.”

That made Enarene’s face brighten considerably. “Mer, could we spar again?” She stepped in front of Anna and readied her sword, and I did the same.

“By the way, where’s Abel?” I asked, looking around after my match with Enarene was finished. Today was a day where the soldiers were training with us, but I didn’t see him anywhere.

“I suppose now that you mention it, I haven’t seen him lately.”

“Hm...” That was too bad, as I was looking forward to sparring with him.

“Abel’s busy with work so he hasn’t been here lately,” Kreuz answered.

“Oh. That reminds me, he wasn’t a permanent member of the first regiment, was he?”

“That’s right.”

“So where is he stationed now?”

“Where was it, again...? Strategy, I think?” Kreuz seemed unsure and asked the guy next to him.

“Nah, I think supplies?” But that man seemed equally unsure.

“Really? I feel like Verlys would know the answer. It’s something like that, anyway,” Kreuz said with a sheepish laugh.

I sighed. “I see... It’s okay, it’s not that important.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I was just curious.” I went ahead and left the training grounds and went back to my room. I wiped off my sweat and lost myself in a book. I was just thinking how I missed Sharia and hoped to see her soon when there was a knock at my door.

“Excuse me.” It was Enarene. “You’ve received an invitation. Shall I read it?”

“An invitation?”

“Yes. To the palace.”

“Huh. I don’t recall any events coming up soon. May I see it?”

Enarene handed me the invitation and I read it. “...They’re welcoming a number of people from the principality of Rimmel and holding a party for them.”

“Oh... A party for foreign guests? How exciting.”

“Yes. I’m sure Louis was invited as well, but I should meet with him to discuss it just in case. I’ll go visit him tomorrow.”

“Very well. I shall send a messenger to the Armelia mansion and let them know you’ll be going to see Lord Louis, my lady.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course. Excuse me.” Enarene left, and I lost myself in my thoughts.

The principality of Rimmel. It was the country next to Tweil and Tasmeria. Why would they be coming to Tasmeria now? Was this a good sign for our kingdom, or a bad sign? Either way, I had a feeling that *something* was going to happen. Warning bells were ringing loudly in my head...and if my hunch was right, Louis would be right in the center of it.

I clenched my fists with resolve.

“I’ll protect him, no matter what.”

Afterword

“**W**ERE WE SUMMONED AGAIN, Mother?”

“Yes! It seems like this author is very dependent upon us, Iris. Let’s start off by reading the letter she left.”

“All right, Mother. Ahem.”

Thank you so much for picking up this book, everyone. I’ve been thinking so much lately about how finishing this story and this spin-off series was only possible due to your support. To be honest, I started writing this story for my own pleasure. I thought about the kind of story I would enjoy reading and started jotting it down for my own notes. I thought maybe I’d post ten chapters or so on the internet and then save the rest for my own personal enjoyment. The only thing that changed my mind was when I discovered there were people out there who actually wanted to read more of it! I decided to instead write down the entire story that was in my head. It truly is all because of you that this story is out in the world. And it’s thanks to those around me that it became a published novel. I really can’t thank you all enough.

“Hm, it seems as though the only reason our story is being told is because there are people who wanted to read it. Does that mean I wouldn’t exist if not for the readers...?”

“Now, don’t say that, Iris! Of course you would exist! After all, you’re the heroine of the main story! If anyone wouldn’t exist, it would be me! If the author had stuck to her original plan, I would only exist in her head!”

“I’m not sure about that! The author seems to adore you, Mother. By the way, whatever happened to the author? Why is she just writing you letters?”

“Oh, she’s just resting somewhere. She said, ‘It’s much too sappy for me!’ and left the letters behind.”

“So in other words, you’re trying to say that you and Father are too lovey-dovey?”

“Hm? Well, I can’t deny that... By the way, Iris, didn’t you and

your family go on a trip together recently? How was it?”

“It was so much fun! We took a trip around the whole duchy, and I got to see everything that has changed. Things are really flourishing thanks to our new trade relationship with Acacia, and I tried all sorts of new fruits and vegetables. The southern territory’s soil is just perfect for growing those crops apparently, and I got to take a tour this time!”

“That doesn’t sound like a vacation at all. Did the children complain?”

“Elpis was brimming with curiosity. He’s been peppering Dean with questions lately. Luce seemed to be having fun getting to see sights she’s not used to as well.”

“I see.”

“By the way, didn’t you and Father go on a trip together too? How was that?”

“It was lovely, of course. Your father hasn’t taken much of a rest since he fell ill, so I was thrilled that he finally got to relax. And I was happy to spend all that time with him too.”

“That sounds nice.”

“I’ll tell you all the details later.”

“I’d love to hear them. But first, I want to hear more about your past!”

“He he he. I will in the next volume. Thank you so much for reading my old tales, everyone. I really hope you continue reading the next volume. Well, until we see each other again. Farewell!”

“See you again soon!”



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